The Cultural Adjustment and Mental Health of African Refugees in the United States: The Case of the Kunama from Eritrea

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The Cultural Adjustment and Mental Health of African Refugees in the United States:
The Case of the Kunama from Eritrea

By

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# Table of Contents

Abstract..........................................................................................................................5

Introduction.....................................................................................................................6

Chapter 1: Background.................................................................................................9
  i. The Plight of Refugees Worldwide.................................................................9
  ii. A History of Subjugation.................................................................................14
  iii. Colonialism in the Horn of Africa..............................................................14
  iv. World War II and the British Administration............................................18
  v. The Ethiopian Federation.............................................................................19
  vi. The Birth of Eritrean Liberation Movements...........................................21
  vii. The Derg......................................................................................................24
  viii. United States Involvement...............................................................25
  ix. Eritrean Independence...............................................................................27
  x. The Place of the Kunama............................................................................28
  xi. The Border Conflict 1998-2001...............................................................30

Chapter 2: Kunama in Exile.......................................................................................35
  i. Motivation to Flee.........................................................................................35
  ii. Wa’ala Nihibi Camp..................................................................................38
  iii. Shimelba Camp.........................................................................................40
  iv. Educational and Social Programming.....................................................42
  v. Resettlement in a Third Country.................................................................46

Chapter 3: Kunama in the United States.................................................................49
  i. Two Cases from Boston...............................................................................50
  ii. Journey to the United States.................................................................53
  iii. Language Barriers....................................................................................55
  iv. Case Management....................................................................................58
  v. Employment................................................................................................59
  vi. Mental Health............................................................................................63
  vii. Interventions and Coping Mechanisms..................................................67
  viii. Policy Implications.................................................................................70
  ix. Psychosocial Support and Care: A Compassionate Response..............73

Discussion.....................................................................................................................75

Conclusion.....................................................................................................................77

Bibliography..................................................................................................................79

Appendices....................................................................................................................84
Abstract

Social service delivery to refugees in the United States may vary depending on the different cultural and historical backgrounds that people bring with them to the resettlement process. The Kunama ethnic group from Eritrea, who fled their country for refugee camps in Ethiopia, provide a particularly challenging case as they most often have limited English-language skills, no employment experience outside of farming and herding, and a complex political history. This study contributes to the knowledge base of refugee resettlement and adjustment into the U.S. To gain an understanding of challenges faced by refugees as they settle in the U.S., two Kunama refugees from Boston were interviewed to provide their own stories. In addition, a literature review of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Kunama culture, and the refugee situation was conducted. The findings are included. The Kunama in the U.S. are faced with the challenges of finding jobs to become economically self-sufficient, limited access to furthering their education, language barriers in health care, and learning to navigate the American environment and way of life. Culturally sensitive and informed social services are vital sources of support for equipping the Kunama and other refugees with transitional help in each of these areas, particularly in maintaining physical protection, well-being, and guarding against potential mental health problems.

Keywords: Refugee, Kunama, Eritrea, Resettlement, Adjustment, Mental Health

Introduction

In a globalized world, humankind has developed a new kind of consciousness and a deepening awareness of global situations. The media has brought volatile genocidal conflicts into the living room of suburban America, British music videos into rural Mali, and Chinese peasant farmers onto the televisions of wealthy Europeans. This expansion into an age of greater universal brotherhood and sisterhood, when governmental interventions frequently cross nation-state borders and humanitarian aid workers travel worldwide, has created a more pressing need to increase individual awareness of international crises and a responsibility to act on those revelations. Unfortunately, the sheer number of countries comprising the globe and the events that occur within them often contributes to personal feelings of powerlessness. The media has unprecedented power in making choices that direct which global conflicts will be well-researched, covered in the news, and brought before the international community, and conversely, which ones will by default be ignored.

One such conflict that has been largely swept under the rug of international awareness is the continued instability between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. Although Eritrea officially gained independence from Ethiopia on May 24, 1993, the recently dissolved Ethiopia-Eritrea boundary commission left much disputed territory in the hands of Ethiopia. Eritrea’s independence came after years of colonial subjugation, including both Italian and British governance, before being classified as Ethiopia’s 14th province in 19621. As Africa’s 52nd nation-state struggles to make a name for itself

independent of its giant neighbor to the South, little hope remains that the tension has passed, as neither side is satisfied with the current boundaries.

Within this backdrop of governmental suppression has emerged a microcosmic struggle for the minority Kunama group to gain the right to self-determination within Eritrea as a nation-state. As an ethnic group largely believed to side with Ethiopia at times during the longest war in African history, the Kunama continue to grapple with their national identity today\(^2\). External confusion persists about whether the Kunama are Eritrean or Ethiopian, and it remains difficult to place them into definitive categories. Through a long series of events, of the estimated 100,000 Kunama people in Eritrea today, over 4,000 have fled across the border into Ethiopia and taken up residence in the Shimelba refugee camp rather than remain at home. Of these refugees, 1,200 of them have been referred to the United States (U.S.) by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to be considered for resettlement\(^3\). This group offers a unique challenge to resettlement organizations due to their complex background and lack of English language skills.

After developing the historical context of Ethiopia and Eritrea in Chapter 1, I will explain the place of the Kunama within this context and then follow them into exile in Chapter 2: first in refugee camps in Ethiopia, and then in resettlement abroad. Chapter 3 focuses on resettlement in the United States, both because that is the context in which I have worked with Kunama refugees, and because it is the country where most of the Kunama have been resettled. As a place of asylum for the Kunama, it is pertinent to

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develop an understanding of the specific issues that refugees face when adjusting to American culture and the particular challenges faced by Kunama refugees as a whole. Attempting to further understand the individual needs of the Kunama in adjusting to life in the U.S. necessitates a complete examination of the history that caused them to become refugees. By understanding the different contextual layers that impact Kunama both at home and abroad, the international community can play a significant role in alleviating the plight of this small and widely ignored ethnic group.

To augment my examination of the Kunama, I conducted interviews with two Kunama refugees who have been living in Boston since 2007. The purpose of these case studies was to draw connections between an ethnic group’s cultural background and their reactions to the resettlement aid that they receive. As two examples of the wider Kunama community and the specific cultural differences that they bring with them to resettlement in the U.S., the interviewees provide a human face to the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict and how it has affected a community of people worldwide. By gaining a more in-depth background of the Kunama’s struggles and the adjustment difficulties they face in resettlement, policy implications for social service agencies can be inferred to enable them to better serve and accompany this unique group of people through their transition.
Chapter 1: Background

The Plight of Refugees Worldwide

With an estimated 13.9 million refugees and asylum seekers in the world today⁴, the need for competent and compassionate institutional structures in place to care for displaced people is critical. Genocide, civil war, famine, and other humanitarian crises that cause people to flee from their homes have created an extremely vulnerable and needy population of people all over the world. The 1951 Geneva Convention that brought the international community together to solve the refugee crisis resulting from World War II proposed a definition for refugees that still holds true today. Although the definition continues to be a vital reference for international law protecting refugees and organizing international bodies to hold each other accountable for the care of refugees, it falls short in the modern world of global interdependence in which we all bear the burden of caring for refugees whether or not they have physically entered our country. The definition of a refugee leaves many people vulnerable by minimizing tragic personal circumstances, excluding internally displaced peoples (IDPs), and diminishing the need for international cooperation.

Despite its flaws, the Geneva Convention provides an important basis for the global community to draw upon when formulating the actions we all take to care for some of the most vulnerable people in the world. By establishing a refugee as any person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the

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country of his nationality,” the international community remains inclusive and tolerant of the human dignity found in personal identity. No matter what personal identifying aspect subjects a person to persecution, they are eligible for refugee status. What actions may qualify as persecution, however, is more problematic.

Defining a person as a refugee enables them some hope of receiving physical safety from a host country, particularly in non-refoulement, potential consideration for resettlement, and ideally the freedom to move around freely and to earn a livelihood. However, it is only when nations respect and adhere to international laws concerning refugees that these benefits can be reaped. The United Nations (UN) consciously chose to use “persecution” in the definition “as the central characteristic of the refugee was made to fit a Western interpretation of asylum seekers.” The Geneva Convention defined refugees within a historical moment: the context of World War II that would later be applied to Cold War refugees fleeing Communist countries as part of a democratic political agenda. Responding to refugees’ distinct needs must include a non-discriminatory approach to caring for those who are persecuted that all countries can adhere to, despite differing political agendas.

This general focus on persecution that was most aptly applied during the Cold War era is also in danger of reducing the humanity of each person’s situation. Not only can people be harassed and discriminated against because of race, religion, or any other personal identifying characteristic, but they can be targeted for murder, rape, and torture

6 U.S. Committee on Refugees and Immigrants (2007), Tables 4 and 5.
for the same reasons. Fear of the government or other people within a person’s home country can range from the fear of being denied social services to the fear of being murdered along with one’s family in a genocidal act. Although tragic personal circumstances among people may differ, it is important to respect the fear that people feel as being “well-founded” no matter their circumstances. Human beings do not willingly choose to leave the comfort and familiarity of their homes without a compelling reason to do so, whether it is an economic inability to earn a sufficient income or the threat of being killed.

The importance of formulating international laws to which all nations can adhere is that the laws “provide objective standards against which the actions of governments can be measured”⁸. Different situations will always garner more awareness because of severity, and although it is important to respond to what the Western world may see as the most pressing of global crises, such as genocide, this focus should not reduce the value of upholding each person’s unique circumstances as significant and worthy of attention. Despite this minimal basis and the UNHCR standard of global equity, nations are often inevitably guided by self-interest, leaving large groups of people unaccounted for and ignored on the world stage.

By leaving IDPs out of the refugee discussion, the Geneva Convention avoids the importance of responding to the human rights needs of people still within their national boundaries. The definition includes that in addition to having a “well-founded fear of being persecuted,” a refugee must be “outside the country of his nationality”⁹. Not only are millions of refugees stuck in protracted situations of long-term exile without any sign

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⁹ UNHCR (1951), 16.
of a durable solution, but “the majority of new forcibly uprooted populations [remain] within their countries of origin.” These new trends in displacement require an expanded definition that will not leave IDPs without protection and vulnerable within their own countries. Adequate care for people who have been victimized and in the process have been driven from their homes is just as vital for IDPs as it is for refugees, especially for those who are still susceptible to persecution within their borders and have been unable but willing to journey out of the line of attack. Requiring victimized peoples to cross national boundaries places an unnecessary burden on those people at the height of their greatest need for humanitarian aid and physical protection.

The modern age of global interdependence requires all nations to get involved in caring for the world’s most vulnerable people. In 1951 the UN upheld that the proper care for the needs of refugees cannot “be achieved without international co-operation” because of the unequal burden mass migrations of refugees may cause for specific countries. Michael Ignatieff argues that we are living in an age guided by a global conscience that transcends national boundaries, so it is necessary to play a role in ameliorating refugee crises regardless of location. As early as the 1960s, because of television news, “we have been brought face-to-face with human misery that was once beyond our ken and therefore beyond the ambit of those emotions- guilt, shame, outrage, remorse- that lead us to make other people’s trouble our business.” Gary Haugen expands this call to care for others without discrimination as a religious act, in that “the

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11 UNHCR (1951), 15.
extent to which our compassion extends beyond our immediate circle is the extent to which we are loving more like God and less like our carnal selves.”13 This necessity for global solidarity in dealing with humanitarian crises such as the care of refugees requires adequate guidelines to be followed for countries which do not physically receive asylum seekers across their borders but still must play a role in the global responsibility to attend to all who are needy.

Minimal international guidelines are a vital way to engage every country in acting on the global refugee crisis. The 1951 Geneva definition, although providing a solid foundation for determining who qualifies as a refugee, leaves many other people vulnerable. As a definition constructed within a particular historical context, national interests deciding what type of persecution is the most deplorable can lead to unequal care for different groups of refugees by ignoring their unique needs. Failing to account for IDPs also leaves millions of people with less access to the humanitarian aid that they desperately need. Although the definition goes on to provide ample guidance for a nation’s responsibility to protect refugees who cross over into their land, the ideal of international cooperation must include the involvement of all nations in caring for those who flee their homes, especially since a majority of refugees are now displaced in other third world countries who do not have adequate economic resources to provide for them. Caring for refugees is the concern of all, especially in an increasingly globalized and educated world that no longer allows us to cite ignorance as an excuse for inaction. It is within this context that the U.S. now finds itself with refugees at its doorstep, including the Kunama. The U.S. is just one nation in a world of interdependent nations that are

13 Haugen, G. (1999), 83.
now in a place of responding to these people without a safe haven and caught between two nations.

A History of Subjugation

Giving an overview of the history of the Kunama and their place within the wider conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia is necessary for understanding how they came to be a people group that has recently been subject to persecution. I do not attempt to make claims about which nation is more justified than the other, who is to blame, or to provide answers for how their border should best be defined in the future. I only attempt to provide a backdrop for where the Kunama people are coming from and the different cultural, political, social, ethnic, and historical spheres that play a role in shaping both their group identity and their individual identities. Peoples are inextricably shaped by the different circumstances surrounding them, and in the case of the Kunama, they have been deeply influenced by the humanitarian and political crises in which they participated and in which they found themselves unwillingly caught up in. The cultural traditions dictated by history also play a role in a group’s ability to adapt to a new environment, such as the U.S., that comes with a distinctively different cultural history. I thus find it important to begin with the role of colonialism in the Horn of Africa and the subjugation under which the Kunama found themselves throughout Eritrea’s tempestuous journey to nationhood, and their uncomfortable position straddling the line between two countries.

Colonialism in the Horn of Africa

The complexity of the relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea stems from the intertwined history of the two nations and their common identity forged under European colonialism and the oppressive Stalinist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam from 1974 to
1991\textsuperscript{14}. The land that is now called modern Eritrea was contested by several different powers over the course of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, with Ethiopia never giving up its claim to the land despite its inability to maintain it effectively against European powers\textsuperscript{15}. Although foreign powers infringe on a nation and drastically disrupt a people’s natural progression, colonialism also provided a common enemy for Eritrea’s different ethnic groups to unite against, marking the beginning of a national Eritrean consciousness and the move towards future independence. The Kunama, however, perhaps never felt comfortable with this national unity imposed by external powers. It remains unclear whether they identify more as Eritreans or as Ethiopians, just one such case of ethnic tribes or pastoralist groups throughout Africa who continue to find citizenship in a nation-state unnecessary and colonially-imposed.

Italy’s entrance onto the world stage by joining other European superpowers in the drive to colonize Africa began towards the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century with Eritrea. Territorial expansion to Eritrea began as early as 1882 when an Italian colonial administration was set up in Assab\textsuperscript{16}. In 1891 an Italian commission was sent across the Mediterranean Sea to evaluate the agricultural prospects of the region. The region was seen as a beacon of hope during a period in which Italy was suffering from declining agrarian production. Italy’s colonial objectives mirrored those of other European powers at that time, setting out in hopes of exploiting Eritrea’s natural resources for industrial and commercial purposes, establishing settler colonies to which Italian peasants could migrate to, and setting up a base from which to expand deeper into Africa with the help


\textsuperscript{15} Henze, P. B. (2001), 231.

of colonial soldiers recruited from the native people. The commission reported back to Italy, remarking on the fecundity of the arable land and the perceived “docility” of the Eritreans towards the Italians. Expansion and the encouragement of Italian settlers thus continued in full force, along with the formulation of the boundaries that now make up modern-day Eritrea.

Although Muslim Eritreans who occupied the lowlands generally welcomed the Italians as protection against the imperial government of Yohannes IV, many other Eritreans, particularly the Tigrinya majority, distrusted Italian rule as a threat to their regional hegemony. This distrust first manifested itself in a January 1887 attack on an Italian fort orchestrated by Yohannes himself. The attack had the opposite of the desired effect, leading to Italy declaring war on the area and dispatching 20,000 troops to Eritrea. By forming an alliance with the Ethiopian government, Italy secured a Treaty in 1889 that recognized Ethiopia’s possession of a significant part of Eastern Eritrea. With the Treaty of Wichale, Italy secured its colonial holdings and officially created the “Colony of Eritrea” on January 1, 1890. This “Red Sea Colony” was now its own political entity, yet it continued to be viewed by Italians as merely a base for their future colonial aspirations of capturing Ethiopia and forming an empire. Expansion persisted, and in the early part of the 1890’s over 400,000 hectares of land was sectioned off by the colonial administration to be distributed among Italian immigrants who settled in the colony. Discontent with the Italian administration grew among native Eritreans as their land was taken away and redistributed.

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A historical event that often marks the beginning of Eritrean unity and a growing call to nationalism was sparked by Italy’s land confiscation plan. Under the leadership of Bahta Hagos, a 2,000 man army of Eritreans arrested the Italian Secretary at Sageneiti along with two telegraph workers on December 14, 1894\textsuperscript{21}. Hagos himself had formerly been employed by the Italians as a chief respected for his Catholicism and loyalty, but was pushed towards rebellion because of the Italian’s policy of confiscating land, womanizing, arresting other leaders, and failing to uphold the democratic institutions that characterized the Akele Guzai region\textsuperscript{22}. Within five short days, the revolt was crushed and Hagos was killed\textsuperscript{23}. Despite the uprising’s marked failure, it is remembered as the first and most important rebellion against the Italians. Hagos “today symbolizes the tradition of resistance to outside occupation that has united Eritreans from the highlands and lowlands”\textsuperscript{24}. Eritrea was unable to cause significant damage to their colonial rulers, however, until fifteen months later when Italy attempted to invade neighboring Ethiopia. Severely underestimating the military might of the Ethiopians, Italy was defeated within hours, as many Eritreans in the Italian army absconded to join their African counterparts\textsuperscript{25}. Italy settled back into a period of empire-building without military force, focusing on the development of Eritrea as a foundation for engaging in commerce with Northern Ethiopia, continuing to recruit colonial soldiers, and building an infrastructure that united the region with railroads, roads, and more defined urban centers.

Italian economic policy was revised in 1926 to enable farmers who had settled in Eritrea to create capitalistic, commercial farms by providing them with tax incentives and

\textsuperscript{22} Killion, T. (1998), 107.  
\textsuperscript{23} Yohannes, O. (1991), 9.  
\textsuperscript{24} Killion, T. (1998), 106.  
\textsuperscript{25} Henze, P. B. (2001), 234-235.
the free importing of Italian farming equipment. This privatization of Eritrean land was only made possible by peasants being forced off their land and pushed into the urban centers to look for work. A growing mass of landless peasants thus came into contact with one another:

The political significance of this economic process was that the affected peasants from all nationalities, for the first time, began to work together and were subjected to the same kinds of exploitation, oppression, and discrimination in big plantations owned by foreign entrepreneurs. Under such conditions, it was inevitable that the rural proletariat would develop some sense of solidarity within itself which, over time, would translate into national awakening and political activism.\(^{26}\)

Since its inauguration, colonialism had marked the way for Eritrean unity and unrest simply by providing a space for different ethnic groups to come into contact with one another and formulate a single identity.

**World War II and British Administration**

Various ethnic groups also confronted each other in the military, with thousands of Eritreans conscripted for colonial expansion into Ethiopia.\(^{27}\) Eritreans participated in the colonial structure predominantly as soldiers, which only increased in the 1930’s when Benito Mussolini’s fascist regime took over. Seeking revenge for Italy’s embarrassing defeat at the hands of Ethiopia in 1896, Mussolini declared that widespread preparations be made for Ethiopia’s conquest.\(^{28}\) These plans were never realized, however, as Britain seized Eritrea from the Italians in 1941 as part of Italy’s eventual defeat in World War II. Eritrea was thus passed between colonial hands, and succumbed to a British Military Administration that would last until 1952. The temporary administration was designed to last only until the Four Powers in World War II: Britain, the United States, France, and the Soviet Union, could determine the colony’s fate. Unable to reach a consensus, the

\(^{26}\) Yohannes, O. (1991), 11.
\(^{27}\) Ibid, 11.
“problem” of Eritrea was passed on once again into the international hands of the UN in 1952\textsuperscript{29}. The continual debate over Eritrea’s destiny that seemed to involve every country but Eritrea itself only added to the small region’s growing nationalist sentiment and desire for self-determination.

**The Ethiopian Federation**

To answer the question of what was going to happen to Italy’s former Red Sea colony, the UN passed a resolution in 1952 to federate Eritrea under the rule of Ethiopia\textsuperscript{30}. The recommendation that “Eritrea shall constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown”\textsuperscript{31} was far from giving Eritrea any personal freedoms. Although the region had grown in distinction from the giant to the South during Italian and British occupation, the former ties between the two areas were seen as valid grounds for establishing one united entity. Many Eritreans other than the Kunama did not welcome the prospect of once again being denied their right to self-rule and subjugated under a more powerful nation, whether or not that nation was African rather than European.

Unity with Ethiopia catered directly to the wishes of Haile Selassie’s government, which wanted Ethiopia’s ancient link to the Red Sea restored for economic purposes\textsuperscript{32}. As mentioned previously, not all Eritreans were against Ethiopian rule, included the more politically ambivalent Kunama. Eritreans divided along ideological lines into two parties: the Unionists who advocated for Ethiopian nationalism, and the anti-Unionists.

\textsuperscript{32} Henze, P. B. (2001), 243.
who supported the idea of an independent Eritrean state and eventually formed the basis for future liberation fronts. Unionists painted a picture of Eritrea as a natural extension of the long and admirable Ethiopian empire, gaining most of its proponents from Christians who saw themselves as a part of Ethiopia’s religious legacy. Muslims from the lowlands, in contrast, felt little brotherhood with their Ethiopian neighbors and thus were more inclined to join the anti-Unionist party. The party consistently drew upon Eritrea’s uniqueness as well as memories of devastation brought upon the Eritrean lowlands at the hands of past Ethiopian Christian nobility. Ethnic divides that somewhat mirrored political, regional, and religious divides set the framework for greater tension within Eritrea under Ethiopian hegemony.

In the 1950’s, however, Ethiopian control became less appealing as the realities of the federation were carried about. Haile Selassie’s government, perhaps embarrassed by the trouble that Eritrea had caused in the past, gradually appropriated powers away from the region to bring them further under Ethiopian domination. This process included the banning of trade unions in 1953, Presidential replacement in 1955, suspending the parliament in 1956, and in 1959 removing the Eritrean flag altogether and replacing it with an Ethiopian one. In March of 1955 Selassie stated that “there are no internal or external affairs as far as the office of His Imperial Majesty’s representative is concerned, and there shall be none in the future. The affairs of Eritrea concern Ethiopia as a whole and the Emperor”. The federation, as had been defined by the UN, failed to last and

33 Araya, M. (1990), 82.
35 Araya, M. (1990), 84.
36 Ibid, 81.
was instead replaced by a widening Ethiopian empire at the expense of Eritrean self-determination. The dismantlement of the federation was complete when in 1962 Eritrea officially became Ethiopia’s fourteenth province rather than a distinct entity under the Ethiopian umbrella. In the name of unity, Ethiopia had effectively provoked rising discontent within its newest province, giving rise to subsequent rebel movements.

The Birth of Eritrean Liberation Movements

For the next long thirty years, the Eritrean nationalist dream manifested itself in armed struggle, both against Ethiopia and within the region itself among groups with varying political sentiments. What is now called Africa’s longest war can be attributed to the ineffectiveness of international involvement, including the UN’s failure to take responsibility for its role in passing the Eritrean state over to Ethiopia as well as the Organization of African Unity (OAU)’s continual denial of the legitimacy of Eritrea’s demands for freedom. Since it was founded in 1963, the OAU has been extremely dubious of further partitioning Africa, not wanting to disrupt the boundaries, however delicate they may be, imposed upon the continent by European superpowers.

Abandoning all hope that the UN would enforce their 1950 resolution and seek retribution against Ethiopia, Eritreans felt that taking up arms was their only option. Without outside aid and fighting against the overwhelming international support of Ethiopia in the beginning, Eritreans embarked on a lengthy war that would cost them thousands of lives.

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39 Ibid, 5.
Eritrea proves to be an example of a long legacy of creating refugees, with exiled people in the Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, and throughout the Middle East as early as the 1950’s. It was from these factions outside the region that the liberation movements were born and political ambitions were organized for Eritrea. Some of these refugees had fled the land because of Emperor Selassie’s abuse of power in attacking the Eritrean lowlands with repeated military fronts, so they were eager to fight for their country’s freedom even from abroad. It was in September of 1961 that Muslim forces from the West sparred with the Ethiopian troops, beginning the thirty year war. Although the battle was brief and drew little attention, it pinpointed the birth of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).

The ELF was founded abroad in Cairo, Egypt by Muslim exiles which had fled Eritrea. The ELF was frustrated with the slow pace of the already existent Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), founded by other Eritrean exiles in the Sudan, which had been propagating a secular movement to unite Eritrea on the basis of a nationally united democratic government. The ELF took over as the main organizational front for Eritrean self-determination amid the birth of multiple political factions fighting for the same nationalism with different agendas. Although the ELF was first composed primarily of nomadic Muslims, the movement spread and eventually included the Christian peasantry in its ranks. The notion of armed struggle against what was viewed as a colonial Ethiopian force was popular, but the ELF was doomed to failure because of

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42 Araya, M. (1990), 94.
its disorganization and the divisiveness that was implied in the movement’s use of tribal, regional, and religious ties in its recruitment process.

No group was more affected by the ELF’s exclusionism than the Kunama, who maintained animosity towards the Bani Amir and Nara peoples, the majority of ELF fighters, both of which had raided the Kunama’s cattle throughout their history. Bani Amir ELF leader Idris Muhammad Awate had a particularly hostile reputation with the Kunama. Retaining memories of being targeted in raids, the Kunama not only avoided involvement in the ELF but sought ways to counteract the rebellion47. Due to this divisiveness, leadership within the ELF recognized the need for reform as well, as it lacked an organized program to reach the masses rather than just recruiting private armies with religious and tribal appeals.

The ELF ended up splitting into three main factions, and in September of 1973, members of two of those factions decided to merge under the new name of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF)48. Despite the ELF’s attempt to liquidate the EPLF and a brief civil war that lasted until 1974, it was clear that popular support was behind the EPLF as even ELF fighters began to oppose the civil war that was counterproductive to the more important goal: Eritrean independence49. According to EPLF Central Committee member Amdemicael Kahsai, the main difference between the two groups was the type of independent Eritrea they were fighting for: “will it be an independent Eritrean state that will safeguard the interests of the mass of the peasants and workers, or will it be a state serving the interests of a minority, more or less similar to the present

47 Pool, David (2001), 50.
By sticking to democratic ideals that attempted to include all Eritreans, the EPLF surpassed the ELF in its ability to mobilize and politicize the masses. The EPLF, however, in light of its initial success, could never have foreseen the length of the independence battle that lay ahead of them.

**The Derg**

Eritrean guerilla movements led by the EPLF became even more difficult and costly under the military junta regime that came into power in Ethiopia in 1974. Mengistu’s reign came to be known as the Derg, Amharic for “committee,” and was known for its brutality and use of torture against political opposition. Up until Mengistu’s regime, the EPLF had been largely successful in gaining control of Eritrean land and driving out Ethiopian forces. Within the same year that Mengistu was tightening his reign, the EPLF had liberated the towns of Afabet, Nakfa, Decamere, Segeneitti, and Keren, the second largest city after the capital Asmara. Rather than planning for over a decade of continued fighting, the EPLF felt that they were on the brink of success with nearly 98% of Eritrean territory liberated. In 1977, Kahsai stated that “with the liberation of Keren, we consider the war in Eritrea to be practically finished”. Just a year later, however, Ethiopia would be making the opposite claim with the recapture of Keren and “the end of the 17-year-old separatist dream”. International involvement was the force that turned the tide against Eritrean independence, as the support of the Soviet Union supplied Mengistu with the weaponry, advice, and air support to launch a mass offensive and to take back control of major Eritrean cities by the

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50 Ibid, 22.  
summer of 1978\textsuperscript{54}. Perseverance would become the rallying cry of the EPLF, as continued Soviet support of Ethiopia reduced nearly all of the hope that still remained that Eritreans would reclaim their right to self-determination.

In an attempt to assert the fulfillment of his victory, Mengistu moved the Ethiopian government to Eritrea’s capital, Asmara, in 1982. The move only lasted for two and half months, as the victory over the Eritrean insurgency was not as finalized as Mengistu would have liked\textsuperscript{55}. The holistic Red Star campaign that Mengistu launched on military, ideological, political, organizational, cultural, and economic fronts was designed “to end for once and for all the organized banditry”\textsuperscript{56}. The Marxist-Leninist government structure in 1984 formed the Worker’s Party of Ethiopia (WPE) and required that most Eritrean civil servants and management level employees affiliate themselves with it. Political opponents were in danger of execution, a reign of terror that culminated in an attempted coup against Mengistu in 1989 in both Addis Ababa and Asmara. Although the coup was immediately defeated in Addis Ababa, it lasted for three days in Asmara until Mengistu’s slogan “Unity or Death” overpowered the temporary government with the execution of 30 senior officers and the arrest of 250 more\textsuperscript{57}. Although the Soviet-inspired Communist revolution proved forceful, the EPLF dream of Eritrean liberation continued to persist, and was not far from being realized.

**United States Involvement**

A 1972 report from the Middle East Research and Information Project stated that “There is a national liberation struggle raging in northeast Africa, and most Americans

\textsuperscript{54} Henze, P. B. (2001), 258.


\textsuperscript{56} Pateman, R. (1998), 83.

don’t know it yet, but, just as in Vietnam, the United States is heavily involved on the side of repression”58. Over the years, U.S. policy towards Eritrea has taken on various contradictions as it has evolved according to U.S. political agendas. The U.S. consulate in Asmara was established back in 1942, just as Britain was establishing control over the former Italian colony. As part of a 1953 defense treaty signed with Ethiopia, the U.S. government established an important military base at Kagnew that stationed as many as 4,000 U.S. military personnel in the 1960s59. Kagnew, home to a satellite tracking system, was a strategic base for the global American intelligence system as the U.S. continued to support the Ethiopian federation along with 153 million dollars in military assistance during its first two decades of rule60. The U.S. had been integral in the original UN decision to join Eritrea with Ethiopia, so it continued to support Selassie’s regime as a leader who in theory represented hope for an independent Africa that was against fascism, colonialism, and racism61. From the Eritrean perspective, however, a fully independent Africa would include an independent Eritrean state, so U.S. military occupation remained an unwelcome obstacle to their dreams. The irony of the mutually beneficial relationship between Ethiopia and the U.S. was that U.S. placement in Kagnew actually meant that “Eritrea provided Ethiopia the military resources it needed for the containment and suppression of Eritrean nationalism”62. U.S. self-interest in Eritrea also translated into the economic realm, as Eritrean development took hold in the exploitation of its natural resources. In the

60 Rose, S. (January 1972), 11.
petroleum sector, the Ethiopian government leased the oil rights to coastal Eritrea to Standard Oil of New Jersey and Mobil in 1963\textsuperscript{63}. Eritreans benefited from other U.S. development projects, however, with World Bank funds invested into the Asmara economy for aid projects such as schools, libraries, and the first Peace Corps volunteers in Eritrea who arrived in 1962\textsuperscript{64}.

U.S. tendencies against Eritrean independence would shift with the regime shift from Selassie to Mengistu, as a heavily anti-Communist policy became wrapped up in an Eritrean insurgency that joined with some of their Ethiopian neighbors against Mengistu’s brutality. In May 1991 Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe, and the EPLF released Ethiopian prisoners, including officers and WPE members at the border. Eritrean WPE members were brought to justice according to their crimes, with most being relegated to attend “re-education” courses about the value of national independence, assigned to national service tasks, and those accused of killing other Eritreans were tried and imprisoned\textsuperscript{65}. The collapse of the Derg in 1991 and the end of armed struggle between what would soon become two countries left little in question about the direction in which the country was heading.

**Eritrean Independence**

Italy’s first-born colony and Africa’s longest war became the first successful secession on the continent in post-colonial times. In his Independence Day speech in 1993, President Isaias Afewerki remarked, “Let us rejoice that our dream and aspirations of attaining national sovereignty and dignity have been realized”\textsuperscript{66}. Ethiopia could no

\textsuperscript{63} Rose, S. (January 1972), 12.
\textsuperscript{64} Killion, T. (1998), 424.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, 162.
longer hold on to hopes of maintaining the economic benefits of easy access to the Red Sea, but Eritrean nationalism actually benefited the Ethiopians, because by “insisting on independence, the EPLF relieved post-Mengistu Ethiopia of the costs of reconstruction and took them all upon itself”⁶⁷. In April of 1993 an EPLF referendum gave Eritrean people two possible votes: to be for or against independence. Of the 1.2 million registered voters, 99.8% of them voted in favor of independence⁶⁸. On May 24, 1993, Eritrea was officially and decisively declared to be Africa’s 52nd nation-state with nearly nonexistent opposition⁶⁹. The dream that independence would forever end the fighting with Ethiopia, however, was short lived as the attempt to construct boundaries between the two nations was not nearly as clear-cut as the fact of Eritrea’s nationhood. The 1990s began as a hopeful decade full of promise for the new nation, but would end with more confusion and the unnecessary use of military force (see map, Appendix 1).

**The Place of the Kunama**

The Eritrean independence that finally brought together a wide variety of ethnicities, religions, regions, and occupations traced its roots back through its oppressed history. Urban centers during Italian colonialism marked the beginning of interethnic relations in Eritrea as meeting grounds for the nine different ethnic groups. Each of these groups speaks their own language, although 80% of Eritreans speak either Tigrinya, the most widely used, or Tigré. The other nationalities include Afar, Baria, Bilein, Hedareb, Kunama, Rashaida, and Saho (see Appendix 2). In addition to having their own languages, all have uniquely defined regional areas, and are at different levels of socio-

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⁶⁸ Henze, P. B. (2001), 263.
economic development\textsuperscript{70}. Trying to place Eritreans into distinct categories, however, is rather difficult. Each ethnic group is heterogeneous within itself, possessing internal cultural, religious, and economic divides\textsuperscript{71}. Eritrea is thus an example of a nation unified by external forces, brought together by joint discontent under colonialism and Ethiopian power. Finding common ground among such a diverse population is an ongoing struggle.

Descended from the Nilo-Saharan people who perhaps occupied western Eritrea in ancient times, the Kunama occupy the Barka administrative region between the Gash and Setit rivers. The Kunama are the only ethnic group that occupies a region south of the Magreb River, a natural boundary used to split Eritrea from Ethiopia. Here the majority of the Kunama practice raising livestock and agriculture\textsuperscript{72} (see village photo in Appendix 3). Although a cohesive group with their own language that is also called Kunama, they include a variety of religious orientations, including a few Christians and a majority of Muslims and traditional Animists\textsuperscript{73}. Many maintain an ancient religion centered on a female creator God, Anna, and a variety of local spirits, shaman healers, and rain makers. Subscribing to a religion that upholds the divine feminine perhaps plays a role in the Kunama being a traditionally gender egalitarian society, lending support to the group’s uniqueness. In fact, “the Kunama are distinctive in Eritrea because of their egalitarian village councils and the high social status and property rights of women, which the present government upholds as a model for other Eritreans to follow. On the other hand, the Kunama have suffered a long history of prejudice and enslavement at the

\textsuperscript{70} Pateman, R. (1998), 5.
\textsuperscript{72} Killion, T. (1998), 286.
\textsuperscript{73} Pateman, R. (1998), 5.
hands of their Muslim and Christian neighbors"\(^{74}\). Partially because of their culture, the Kunama have had difficulty finding a national home in either Eritrea or Ethiopia.

Since the 16th century, there are records of slave raids against the Kunama at the hands of their Eritrean neighbors\(^ {75}\). The language employed by other Eritreans in referring to this minority ethnic group has only encouraged this history. Although the word Kunama means “those who I call people,” their neighbors have commonly referred to them as Baza\(^ {76}\). “Baza” is an Arabic and Tigrinya name with a derogatory connotation similar to “slave” that refers to the ancient history of the Kunama being enslaved to the Arabs and the highlanders\(^ {77}\). There has been longstanding tension, particularly between the neighboring Bani Amir and Nara people, which led many Kunama to actually welcome Italian colonialists as protectors against village raids. When many Bani Amir and Nara peoples got involved with the independence movements against Ethiopia, some Kunama were more prone to side against their ancient enemies and to join Ethiopia’s side. Not only were the Kunama meagerly involved with the Eritrean independence movement, but many forged close bonds with the Ethiopian government and became recruits to fight against independence\(^ {78}\). For years Kunama sympathy was closely intertwined with the Ethiopian government and Unionist ideology, signaling a future of national identity confusion and a failure to be accepted by either country as their own.

**The Border Conflict, 1998-2001**

The Kunama, formerly a largely ignored minority group, became a central point of conflict between the two nations when a crisis surfaced over the unresolved border

\(^{75}\) Ibid, 287.
\(^{76}\) Ibid, 286.
\(^{77}\) Ibid, 111.
between Eritrea and Ethiopia in May 1998. Former brothers in the defeat of the Mengistu
regime earlier that decade, the border war seemed confusing and unnecessary to the
international community who had been trying to stop the buildup of troops on either side
for months. Although Eritreans would disagree, the war initially happened because
Eritrea, unprovoked, invaded territory being administered by Ethiopia\textsuperscript{79}. Each side
amassed thousands of troops around the disputed territory: a 250-square-mile zone
around the town of Badme called the Yigra triangle. Despite the disputed border debate
that has been going on since Eritrea’s independence, the two nations had remained allies
until the border conflict erupted. The New York Times reported that “Details of what
occurred are sketchy. Ethiopia says Eritrean troops crossed into its territory, ransacked
health centers and schools and kidnapped civil servants. Ethiopian officials maintain that
the troops are still inside their territory”\textsuperscript{80}. Conflict over a triangle of land emerged as a
conflict over a people group, as the Kunama were suddenly confronted by warring
nations on their turf. Straddling a border as a shared people between two nations, a
unique Kunama identity would form as thousands fled the battlefield amid the confusion
of which nationality they more closely identified with.

Perhaps the most confusing aspect of the border dispute is that the disputed
territory has little to make it desirable. The town of Badme is “a place of no particular
consequence in the highlands…none of the Badme region has much value or historical or
emotional resonance. It is merely undefined”\textsuperscript{81}. Yet, somehow this area sparked a bitter
battle that would cost thousands of lives on both sides. Despite the poverty of each

\textsuperscript{79} Henze, P. B. (2001), 7.
\textsuperscript{80} McKinley, James C., Jr. (1998, May 21, 1998). Ethiopia and Eritrea seem ready to do battle. [Electronic
\textsuperscript{81} Fisher, I. (1999, March 14, 1999). The world; wherever that town is, someone will die for it. [Electronic
nation, spending in the border conflict amounted to nearly a billion dollars for each side. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, both former guerilla leaders who actually fought together, were seen as beacons of hope for peace in the Horn of Africa and as leaders who would grow into their roles as reformers, both having the support and friendship of the Clinton administration in the U.S.\textsuperscript{82} International disappointment abounded at the eruption and the continuance of violence between the two nations. Eritrea declared that they were simply reclaiming their rightful territory, while Ethiopia labeled their affront an invasion.

Attempts to end the battle would prove difficult. Despite their limited resources and disadvantage in numbers, Eritrea stubbornly continued to hold out hope for establishing what Afwerki viewed as their original territory created during colonialism and proved that the perseverance their guerilla fighters had learned over decades of fighting for independence had not yet run out. In June of 2000 the \textit{New York Times} reported: “Ethiopia and Eritrea were engaged in heavy fighting all along their border today, just hours after Eritrea said that it had accepted a comprehensive peace plan that included a cease-fire”\textsuperscript{83}. Afwerki seemed unwilling to admit that his invasion had been a gross miscalculation, not anticipating the firm counterattack on Ethiopia’s part, so the Eritrean army was pushed to continue against all odds.

In addition to the inordinate loss of life and economic resources that continued along with the armed struggle, one of the tragedies of the invasion was the breakdown of brotherhood that had seemed to exist between the two nations since Eritrean


independence. Ethiopian bitterness over Eritrea’s attack led the government to expel thousands of Eritreans, some of which had been living in Ethiopia their whole lives. What had appeared to be a salvaged inter-country relationship was once again broken. Economic relations were cut off as Ethiopian exports turned to the ports of Djibouti for help\textsuperscript{84}. With international pressure bearing down on Eritrea, however, the crisis would not be allowed to continue for too much longer. In December of 2000 Kofi Annan, then the Secretary-General of the UN, announced that the war was over along with a peace treaty signed in Algeria. The treaty set in motion discussion about the disputed 620-mile border region, as well as initiated the release of prisoners and detained civilians\textsuperscript{85}. With two years of fighting and around 100,000 deaths at a close, 2001 proved that the two nations were finally committed to upholding the cease-fire. Even though the border had not yet been finalized, a committed peace replaced fighting. Birhane Ghebremichael, a 58-year old Eritrean farmer, allowed himself to renew hopes of returning to his home: “‘Both we and the Ethiopians have had enough of war,’ he said. ‘It looks like this is finally going to be settled’”\textsuperscript{86}. With weapons put away and silence reigning over the battlefield, national conflict would take on a more social nature as Eritreans remembered the dissent of the Kunama.

Throughout the border conflict, the Kunama acted as a critical voice within their country, voicing concerns against President Afewerki and the EPLF’s motives for crossing into Ethiopian territory. Particularly from outside Eritrea, “anti-EPLF exiles have become vocal in Europe and America and at least two groups in Eritrea, Kunamas

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{84} Henze, P. B. (2001), 16-17.
\end{footnotesize}
and Afars, have announced opposition to the EPLF’. With an almost prophetic voice in 2000, Paul Henze comments that “Severe measures will no doubt be taken to contain them”\textsuperscript{87}. Severe measures were indeed taken as ethnic rivalries erupted against the Kunama and Afewerki proved that political opposition would not be tolerated while Eritrea fought to establish itself on the world stage. Victimized by former ties with Ethiopia in the wake of resentment between the two nations, the Kunama struggled to find a home and thousands fled across the border to escape political persecution.

\textsuperscript{87} Henze, P. B. (2001), 23.
Chapter 2: Kunama in Exile

Thousands of Kunama began crossing the border out of Eritrea from the beginning of the war in 1998 to the height of the border conflict in 2000. Some fled to avoid conscription into the army for a political cause they disagreed with, while others felt persecuted from a long history of being suspected of harboring pro-Ethiopian sentiments and continuing to inhabit Ethiopian occupied territory. As the war ended, even more Kunama left Eritrea because they feared governmental repercussions for their alleged disloyalty\textsuperscript{88}. The irony is in their being welcomed into supposedly enemy territory, but the Kunama have never fit in well with their national counterparts. Multiple refugee camps have been established in Ethiopia since the beginning of the 21st century to account for this group, as well as other war victims and army deserters. What began as a tiny ethnic group estimated to be between 60,000 to 100,000 people in Eritrea has now spread out to inhabit areas all across the globe, from nearby Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt to the United States, Canada, and Europe. Today, the Kunama are almost more aptly described as global citizens than as Eritreans or Ethiopians.

Motivation to Flee

The Geneva Convention sets a precedent of trust for those people fleeing persecution and crossing an international boundary, because there must be a legitimate reason to leave before people are willing to forsake their homeland along with all that is familiar. Although many people leave simply with hopes for a better future as economic migrants, human beings in general “move about a great deal, but not because they love to move. They are, most of them, inclined to stay where they are unless their life is very

difficult there”. Eritreans were driven from their homes, and in most cases away from their families, because the life they were being forced to live or the prospect of what their life would be like in the future was bleak.

In addition to the violence of the border war, the political climate and governmental persecution led many people to fear for their lives, privacy, and personal freedom. Abolishing freedom of the press, in September 2001 the Eritrean government shut down all private newspapers and imprisoned a significant number of journalists. Reporters without Borders, a Paris-based organization, has labeled Eritrea “Africa’s largest prison for journalists” and among the five worst countries in the world for repression of the media. Political suppression also turned to Kunama, as those who were suspected to be traitors siding with Ethiopia during the border conflict. One Kunama woman, Izabella Aron, who was eventually resettled to the United States, tells her story: “Back in 1991 when Eritrea was ‘liberated,’ the new government harassed me and imprisoned me for seven months for the simple reasons that I have a minority ethnic background and that I was married to a former Ethiopian soldier.” In the wake of establishing Eritrea’s independence in 1993 and abolishing all political parties except for the EPLF, Eritrean nationals who were viewed as a threat to a homogenous political climate were in danger of imprisonment, fines, or persecution. Today, Isaias Afewerki’s administration maintains its hegemony over the political direction of the country, and is quick to discourage any signs of opposition.

91 Ibid.
Perhaps the most common reason for Eritreans becoming refugees and taking refuge in Ethiopia, however, was forced military conscription, especially for those who disagreed with the necessity of fighting Ethiopia over what could be seen as a trivial border argument. In 2000, Berhane Marco, a refugee formerly working with a USAID project in Eritrea, said: “we are fleeing extortion and forced recruitment by the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) army, and hope to be able to till our lands one day without outside intervention”\(^92\). All Eritrean men are forced to serve in the army, including university students who simply want to learn and dream of building a career and exchanging intellectual ideas rather than putting themselves in danger of cutting their lives short. Most unsettling is the punishment inflicted upon family members who remain in Eritrea if their son decides to flee rather than join the army. In 2007, an ex-soldier said that he heard his family back in Eritrea was fined 50,000 nakfa (about $3,300) because he had fled, a story that was corroborated by others in the refugee camps whose families experienced the same thing\(^93\). Although other countries in the world, such as Singapore and North Korea, obligate service in the armed forces for a set number of years, the volatile ongoing border dispute with Ethiopia leaves those Eritreans who disagree with the purpose of the war without options for political expression.

The government maintains that each man is assigned to 18 months of military service, but many refugees claimed that the national military was not adhering to their rules and were taking people from their homes and students from their schools without warning and forcing them to fight. The Eritrean government denies these claims, saying

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that there had been no second call-up\textsuperscript{94}. Eritrean authorities even went so far as to claim that the Kunama refugees had fled against their will, and should be viewed as abductees by the Ethiopian army. A government official in 2002 stated that “people don’t go voluntarily with an invading army. And if they did go voluntarily, in the midst of war, then they are not refugees. They must be sent home”\textsuperscript{95}. The story coming from the refugees themselves, however, whether citing forced military service or ethnic persecution, point back to a seemingly endemic problem with the Eritrean political climate and the human dignity and prosperity that is taken away along with a lack of freedom. Conditions in refugee camps, although hopefully providing safety from continued persecution, are still lacking in providing basic activities for human dignity that would enable their occupants to prosper. Eritrean refugees, both Kunama and other ethnic groups dodging forced military service, have waited years for the politics of their home country to change and in many cases are still waiting for a durable solution.

\textbf{Wa’ala Nihibi Camp}

The Kunama are a refugee group that clearly fails under the definition provided by the 1951 Geneva Convention, but the international support afforded to them in response to their persecution as an ethnic group is not sufficient in providing many of them with opportunities for the future. The camps in Ethiopia, including Wa’ala Nihibi, have been far from temporary as eight years after the war’s end the Kunama still have little hope of returning to their Eritrean homeland without severe social and governmental


maltreatment. The search for durable solutions has been critical in resettling the Kunama and in finding permanent homes for them outside of Eritrea.

Near the town of Shiraro in a remote area of Ethiopia, the Wa’ala Nihibi camp was set up to accommodate some 4,000 of the Kunama who fled in 2000 at the height of the war. A November 2002 report states that like all refugee camps “Wa’ala Nihibi is supposed to be a temporary camp, until a suitable site is identified further away from the border”. The UNHCR began running into problems in 2002 because the Kunama in the camp were being joined by Eritreans of other ethnic groups who were fleeing forced military recruitment as well. The blanket refugee status UNHCR had been giving to Eritreans crossing into the camp across a 25 kilometer buffer zone that separates the two countries had to be reevaluated, as the camp struggled to accommodate the new influx of refugees. UNHCR said the blanket refugee status would end in December 2002. One of the primary problems that arise in refugee camps such as Wa’ala Nihibi is the simple lack of anything to do. Without viable economic activities and a constant dependence on foreign aid for basic needs, refugees are left with little purpose and are often in danger of joining rebel groups.

The close proximity of the camp to the border immediately raised questions about the safety of its occupants. Just 20 kilometers away, Wa’ala Nihibi falls into hotly contested area: the Yirga triangle near the town of Badme. After walking for several days, Eritrean refugees set up camp at Wa’ala Nihibi using scavenged wood and plastic.

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97 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (22 November 2002).
tarps provided by relief officials in Ethiopia. Humanitarian assistance was critical as soon as the camp was set up, as in 2000 the UN World Food Program noticed a severe lack in adequate drinking water and signs of malnutrition in the children\textsuperscript{99}. In addition to health concerns, because of the camp’s nearness to Eritrea the refugees were constantly in fear of being attacked by the Eritrean army because many of them were deserters\textsuperscript{100}. The camp has also faced problems with multiple fires, such as a blaze started by flames from open fires in 2003 that destroyed a third of the shelters, many made out of straw. After three years, it became obvious that a safer camp site with better resources was necessary and the UN’s Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia (EUE) increased the pressure for relocation\textsuperscript{101}. With limited hopes for repatriation, resettlement in a third country, or greater integration into Ethiopian society, the international community pushed to establish a more stable camp site farther from the border.

**Shimelba Camp**

By 2003 when it was time to move to a new site farther from the border, Wa’ala Nihibi was home to some 4,000 ethnic Kunama refugees and around 1,000 other Eritreans. Many ex-soldiers from the Eritrean armed forces were still dressed in combat clothes because they were the only ones they had, so along with the camp relocation the refugees were given new clothing\textsuperscript{102}. At this point the involvement of the international community stepped up, realizing that repatriation was not a forthcoming, plausible solution and that the Eritreans would need heightened humanitarian aid until a better

\textsuperscript{99} Agence France-Press (14 August 2000).
\textsuperscript{100} United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (22 November 2002).
\textsuperscript{102} United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (10 April 2003).
solution was found. In September of 2003 the German government pledged a significant amount of money to help move the refugees through the UNHCR. The new camp would also need improved facilities like easy access, water, and shelter\textsuperscript{103}. The new site was pinpointed at Shimelba, about 60 kilometers south of Wa’ala Nihibi by road, but again a lack of funding and resources put off the move until the following year\textsuperscript{104}.

Shimelba is located in a semi-arid, rocky landscape with scattered trees and shrubs. In 2004, refugees were still arriving in Ethiopia from Eritrea at a rate of about 250 per month, and these would also be directed to Shimelba. Some $800,000 would be spent by the UNHCR to build the camp, equipping it with the necessary water supplies, shelters, health centers, and schools. This site, unlike the former, was constructed to meet international standards and UNHCR protection rules\textsuperscript{105}. Unfortunately, malnutrition remained a critical concern for Eritrean refugees. A 2005 Humanitarian Report on Ethiopia noted critical malnutrition in Shimelba, with the highest rates among the Kunama. The differences were puzzling and led researchers to undergo an analysis of the socioeconomic and cultural practices that may account for these rates, as refugees were technically receiving 2,100 calories a day per person\textsuperscript{106}. By April 2007, the Kunama were only 30\% of Shimelba’s population, and the camp grew to accommodate some 14,300 Eritreans continuing to cross the border, mostly of Tigrinya descent.

\textsuperscript{103} United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (1 September 2003). Germany to help move Eritrean refugees. \textit{Integrated Regional Information Networks}, Retrieved 20 February 2008, from \url{http://www.reliefweb.int/}


\textsuperscript{105} United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (7 June 2004). Ethiopia: UNHCR moves Eritrean refugees away from border zone. \textit{Integrated Regional Information Networks}, Retrieved 20 February 2008, from \url{http://www.reliefweb.int/}

UNHCR notes that the Kunama are a more vulnerable population than the Tigrinya because they are less likely to receive external financial support from family and friends, have less formal education, and are less familiar with modern technology. The refugees typically live in makeshift shelters constructed of mud bricks or mud and tree limbs. The Kunama tend to construct circular houses with conical roofs made of thick grasses. As in most refugee camps, there are limited options for economic activities. For women, life is consumed by preparing food, washing clothes, gathering water and firewood, and caring for their children. Men, in contrast, pass the time by playing bingo, discussing issues, and drinking arake (locally brewed liquor), beer, or tea\textsuperscript{107}. Life in a refugee camp can be characterized more aptly as the right not to die rather than the right to live. Restrictions placed upon refugees by the country of asylum often make it difficult for engaging in any sort of productive activities. Prone to becoming protracted situations in which refugees are warehoused at sites for over five years, resettlement becomes a necessary option when repatriation is not foreseeable. For the Kunama, a continually volatile relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea despite the peace agreement, along with seemingly discriminatory political policies, made hopes of ever returning to Eritrea diminish further.

**Educational and Social Programming**

When refugee camp situations move from temporary to protracted, humanitarian aid organizations find themselves in emergency situations of providing means to a livelihood that extends beyond the basics of food and shelter. Education, health care, social activities, and creative outlets for expression are vital to the healthy development of both children and adults housed in camps. As the crisis of finding durable solutions

for Kunama and other Eritrean refugees became critical in Ethiopia, psychosocial programming became more integrated into both Wa’ala Nihibi and Shimelba to create a more constructive environment for their inhabitants. In 2001, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), along with UNHCR, implemented educational systems into the camp in order to “re-introduce this unique group of children to the classroom and help them overcome their losses through meaningful, structured activities.” The project, “entitled ‘Emergency Education and Psychosocial Support for Kunama Refugee Children and Adolescents in Ethiopia’ provided educational and recreational activities for 550 children and youth between the ages of 5 and 25”\(^{108}\). Although refugee camps are never ideal situations for asylum, the presence of programming serves to lessen the impact of being placed in such a situation and attempts to allow the camp’s occupants to live as normal a life as possible until a more permanent solution is found.

When implementing camp-wide initiatives, the participation of the refugees in their own decision-making process is a vital but underused resource. Especially for the Kunama who came into camps having a historic inability to self-determine their fate and to play a role in the governance of their country, participation can be a valuable first step towards greater independence and preparation for self-sufficiency. Refugee participation, however, “probably has the worst ratio of rhetoric to reality of any concept in the refugee field.” While constraints include the preference of host countries, the reluctance of NGOs to make participation a priority, cultural barriers, conflicts within the refugee population, and the absence of qualified community organizers, the benefits of participation are numerous: it enhances self-esteem, acts as a coping mechanism, reduces

\(^{108}\) IRC (2002), 2.
feelings of isolation and unimportance, and promotes protection. Keeping this in mind, IRC programming in Ethiopia sought the help of the refugee community at all phases of their educational projects, involving the input of community members, parents of those children who would be attending the schools, and camp leaders. Establishing programming thus became an additional source of mobilizing the community and organizing the Kunama to take an active role in their future.

As of 1997, the UNHCR found that “only a quarter of UNHCR assisted minors, 6 to 17 years of age, attend school, and boys outnumber girls two to one”. To remedy this discrepancy and the lasting impact of children in refugee camps missing integral years of educational development, the IRC added education as a primary intervention measure. The stated goal of the IRC’s educational programs in Wa’ala Nihibi was “to provide meaningful and constructive learning opportunities for the Kunama refugee children living in temporary asylum in northern Ethiopia”. A National Project Manager was hired, trained, and assigned to oversee the selection and training of community teachers and youth leaders as well as the purchase and distribution of educational and recreational materials. The secondary objective of the IRC was “to increase refugee communities’ capacity to respond to the protection and psychosocial needs of their children.” By integrating the community’s input with a Parent-Teacher Association of over 100 members and the training of community committees through workshops, adults were held accountable for taking an active role in the education of their children and participating in the overall well-being of the camp youth.

111 Ibid, 8.
112 Ibid, 3.
113 Ibid, 4.
Providing educational materials to the Kunama proved extremely difficult, as their native language is spoken by so few people. The development of a curriculum for the camp school included the limited Kunama language books that were carried across the border by the refugees themselves, as well as local textbooks and teacher guides that were obtained\textsuperscript{114}. The older generations of Kunama were highly educated before the border conflict arose, and are known for being fluent in several languages, including Kunama, Tigrinya, Arabic, English, and Italian. Many had previously studied at universities either in Asmara or Addis Ababa and returned to their home communities to share their acquired knowledge with others. Today, however, younger children are illiterate in both Kunama and Tigrinya, while in addition a firm knowledge of English and/or Amharic is required to be able to continue their studies beyond high school in either Eritrea or Ethiopia, respectively. Camp leaders informed the IRC upon arrival that the current generation lacks even the basic numeral skills that are necessary to properly keep track of livestock\textsuperscript{115}.

Having to start from scratch, then, community leaders and teachers were forced to get creative in procuring adequate educational materials. Teachers fluent in Tigrinya began translating textbooks into Kunama so that they could use the handwritten version for teaching, and picture books became valuable resources to teach subjects such as science and to develop the children’s vocabulary\textsuperscript{116}. Having to construct an education structure in a true emergency setting created an urgent need for resourcefulness from humanitarian leaders and Kunama community leaders alike as they found ways to make up for and further their children’s lost years of schooling.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{114} IRC (2002), 11.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid, 9.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid, 12.
\end{flushright}
Educational programming not only benefits the children in acquiring a knowledge base and widening their opportunities for the future, but “for the Eritrean Kunama refugees who sought refuge in northern Ethiopia due to persecution, the witnessing of killings and violence, coerced conscription into armies, and forced migration – a daily routine of normalizing activities for children and adolescents was welcomed”\(^{117}\). Being able to focus on learning can act as a coping mechanism and a source of hope for refugee children. When idleness is seen as the “principal source of misery in the refugee camp”\(^{118}\), occupying children and adults alike with meaningful activity is a vital piece of overall psychosocial health. While some children may require more intensive psychological intervention and counseling to recover from trauma and loss, many other children “recover remarkably well if their basic survival needs are met and they have the social support and intellectual and physical stimulation that an education program can provide”\(^{119}\). Education is a basic human right, and the structure it provides has the added benefits of shortening the process of trauma recovery and establishing normalization. Providing opportunities for development is integral for populations like the Kunama who have a history of marginalization and have been denied equitable access to resources in the past.

**Resettlement in a Third Country**

Resettlement is a leap of faith for refugees who choose to apply for it. Not only are they deciding to move to a different country, but they are also giving up hope on the possibility of returning to their homeland. It is extremely difficult to know how long to wait for a political or social situation to change in such a way that repatriation becomes a

\(^{117}\) IRC (2002), 11.
\(^{118}\) Ibid, 9.
\(^{119}\) Ibid, 10.
safe option, although it is always the most desired option for both refugees and refugee resettlement organizations. For Oumer Abdelawel, a 35-year old former journalist from Eritrea, being resettled to New Zealand was only the lesser of two evils. Realizing that his economic well-being and career path were dependent on his ability to speak his native language, he knows that “the further I go from home, the more my cherished dream of growing as a professional journalist withers away…If there were any prospects of going home in the near future, I would prefer staying some more time in the camp to resettlement”\textsuperscript{120}. Resettlement is a frightening process no matter where refugees are coming from, and often a dangerous situation that is familiar can be more desirable than facing the unknown. Such was the case for several hundred ethnic Kunama who withdrew their applications for resettlement in 2007, citing a sense of kinship and a strong desire to remain near to the lands of their ancestors\textsuperscript{121}. Still, others had made up their minds that the prospect of returning home was not a feasible option for the future, and braved the resettlement process to escape spending more years confined to a camp.

The bureaucratic process surrounding applications for resettlement in a third country can be an added stressor in itself, as the international refugee regime falls critically short of being able to accommodate the millions of people in need worldwide. No more than 1 percent of refugees end up being offered resettlement in a third country\textsuperscript{122}, so the impetus to care for refugees within host countries and to prevent the political and economic crises that create refugees in the first place is essential. At a time of confusion and desperation in their lives, refugees in camps or elsewhere often have to

\textsuperscript{120} Egziabher, K. G. (6 April 2005).
\textsuperscript{122} Loescher, G. (1993), 148.
seek out the resources necessary to apply for asylum and contact the proper authorities.

With the burden of proof of persecution placed on the refugee, “the administrative procedures associated with obtaining asylum are arduous, stressful, and often continue for many years”¹²³. In the biography of Valentino Achak Deng, a Sudanese refugee, Dave Eggers tells of the emotional rollercoaster that accompanies the resettlement process:

“When the first resettlement flights departed, there were celebrations all over Kakuma, and I went with Achor Achor to the airfield to watch the planes disappear. I was overjoyed for these young men, fully believing that I would soon join them in America. As the flights continued, though, as I heard the near-constant news of the good fortune of this boy and that boy, I became numb to their happiness, and could only question my own inadequacies. Perhaps five hundred young men left, and as the months passed and I received no word from the UN, I became less happy for those who had been chosen…Each week there was incalculable joy for them and devastation for the rest of us”¹²⁴.

Navigating the resettlement process is incredibly difficult without access to immigration lawyers who are well-versed in the system’s complexities, but it can also place an obstacle to seeking safety in the way of those who are overwhelmed and confused. The millions of people who are denied asylum along with the few who are accepted can create rifts in societies and further destroy the cohesiveness of a cultural or ethnic group. For those who are accepted for resettlement, however, there is often a mixture of joy in future prospects, sorrow for what they are leaving behind, and a whole host of adjustment difficulties ahead of them.

Chapter 3: Kunama in the United States

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”
-Inscription on the Statue of Liberty, New York City

The United States espouses a “tradition of being a safe haven for the oppressed,” with a policy of admitting those refugees who are of particular humanitarian concern. Historically, the first official refugee legislation that went into effect was the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 following World War II, which provided for the admittance of some 400,000 displaced Europeans. Future laws enabled the U.S. to welcome people fleeing communist regimes. After the fall of the Vietnamese regime in 1975, the hundreds of thousands of Indochinese seeking resettlement pushed Congress to restructure their procedures and standardize a system for the on-going acceptance of refugees. In 1980, they passed the Refugee Act which makes provisions for the normal flow of people into the country as well as emergency precautions to be taken in the event of a larger and more desperate humanitarian crisis. Federal assistance was authorized to be used for the resettlement of refugees, and the system remains a joint partnership between the public and private sectors, with federal organizations and funding working closely with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to facilitate the entrance, support, and adjustment of new arrivals.\textsuperscript{125}

The U.S. resettles more refugees than any other country worldwide, although host countries and asylum countries technically house millions more. Since the Refugee Act came into existence, annual admissions figures averaged around 98,000 people\textsuperscript{126}, although after the increase in homeland security brought on by the tragedies of


\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
September 11, 2001, the rate has been cut in half, with just over 41,000 refugees coming to the U.S. in 2006\textsuperscript{127}. Cognizant of the humanitarian burden on Ethiopia because of the plight of Eritrean refugees and the lack of any durable solution, starting in 2007 the UNHCR began referring the Kunama for resettlement. Over 1,200 Kunama out of a camp population of 4,000 were recommended to the U.S. for resettlement consideration\textsuperscript{128}, the others having opted out, perhaps hoping for eventual repatriation or an unwillingness to leave that which was familiar to them. While some viewed resettlement in the U.S. as an opportunity for safety and more productive lives, others preferred to retain closer ties to their homeland and families.

**Two Cases from Boston**

To understand the problems that Kunama refugees face upon resettling in the U.S., interviews were conducted with two such refugees to illuminate the personal struggles they face. Each refugee carries individual stories with them when crossing national boundaries (See Appendix 4 for interview questions). The study was explained to the participants prior to participating, and informed consent was obtained according to the guidelines of the Boston College Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix 5). The participants agreed to the use of their first names along with their stories. Precautions were taken to ensure that participants were allowed to ask questions and felt free to decline to answer any question. Although I originally received IRB approval to conduct interviews with all six of the Kunama resettled by the IRC this year, my study was eventually cut to a sample size of two, mostly due to the language barrier (see IRB Research Summary Appendix 6). In addition, one potential participant unexpectedly out-

\textsuperscript{127} U.S. Committee on Refugees and Immigrants 2007 (2007), Table 16.
\textsuperscript{128} Ranard, Donald A. (2007), 1.
migrated to Las Vegas prior to the study. With the two participants who were interviewed, no translator was used, as none were available and both interviewees were deemed to have sufficient English skills to understand and respond to basic questions.

I got to know Marco and Mikele, along with four other Kunama refugee men, while interning at the IRC. After making an appointment, the two were kind enough to come to the office to be interviewed. Marco was especially interested in the purpose of the interview, which I explained would enable me to help other people understand better who the Kunama are and where he is coming from. I asked questions that would enable them to share a bit of their story: when they were in refugee camps, when they came to the U.S., and why they fled Eritrea. The bulk of the questions addressed their adjustment once they arrived in the U.S., including how the Kunama culture differs from the American culture, what adjustments such as English they have found the most difficult, what they like and dislike about the U.S. so far, and what makes them feel the most at home in the U.S. All of these questions were structured to address the similarities and differences between the two cultures: Kunama and American.

Marco and Mikele both arrived in the U.S. on September 4, 2007, just about the same time I began working at the IRC, so I was able to witness their adjustment process firsthand from the start. As a small sample size, although two case studies provide very little information that can be inferred to a wider population, the stories of Marco and Mikele are central to showing detailed examples of the resettlement process and provide a human face to a wider crisis that can often seem distant. Understanding another culture becomes much more meaningful and effective through the mutual learning associated with human interaction and intercultural dialogue. Considering the limited print sources
available that discuss the Kunama, it was especially vital to obtain information directly from the source given the scope of this study.

Although both men bring with them very different stories, both felt forced to flee their home country as members of the Kunama ethnic group and spent a significant amount of time in refugee camps in Ethiopia before coming to the U.S. Knowing that as soon as he finished high school he would face forced conscription into the Eritrean armed forces, Marco fled to Shimelba in August of 2005. He did not like the prospect of being coerced into combat for a long time without being able to see his family, although by fleeing he is still not able to see his family, all of whom still live in Eritrea. Wary of the government’s manipulative strategies for getting rid of political opposition, Marco also noted that many people were disappearing at this time and faced jail or financial punishment for evading military service or other opposition activities. Since the EPLF became the only political party in Eritrea, any deviant thinking was seen as dangerous and threatening to the national unity the country is still working to create since obtaining independence just fifteen years ago.

Grateful for the chance to resettle after two years of living in Shimelba, Marco continues to give off an incredibly positive attitude about his life. Appreciative of the diplomacy and the democratic ideals of the American government, he claims that absolutely nothing is similar between the two countries, particularly noting gender roles. Despite the Kunama being known as an especially gender egalitarian society, Marco discussed how in Eritrea man is the ruler and his wife is the helper. Violence was more pervasive and accepted, made evident in the discipline of both women and children. As a critical voice within his culture, Marco appreciates the political freedom in the U.S. as he
adjusts to a new one. Having made it through one Boston winter and his first encounter with snow, it seems that life can only improve for him as he adapts to a steady job and improving his English.

Having lived in refugee camps since they were first established for Eritreans in Ethiopia, Mikele had a much longer road towards coming to the U.S. Before arriving in Shimelba, Mikele was one of the original Kunama in Wa’ala Nihibi, arriving there when he was just 14 years old without his family. Like Marco, he wanted to escape forced military conscription and “just wanted to live” rather than being subject to dangerous and potentially fatal military conflict. The Kunama in Ethiopia and Eritrea are the same, he says, so perhaps it was difficult to see the purpose behind fighting a war against kinfolk separated by a highly contested border. Mikele is also the first from his family to move to the U.S., and still has family members both back in Eritrea and currently living in Shimelba. Although he concurs with Marco that “nothing is the same,” the two seem to be handling things well just six months after their arrival. Throughout resettlement, the IRC was critical in finding an apartment for Marco and Mikele, helping them practice English, providing financial assistance, and searching for jobs. I will continue to refer to these cases as they illuminate wider refugee adjustment issues that arise during the resettlement process in the U.S.

**Journey to the United States**

The Kunama provide a particularly difficult resettlement case due to their lack of education, extremely limited English skills, a history of agricultural and pastoral economic activities that are not marketable in the U.S., and drastically different cultural traditions. Unfamiliar with urban city life, effective support immediately upon arrival in
the U.S. is critical for this “particularly vulnerable group requiring special patience and attention.” Very few Kunama have relatives or friends already settled in the U.S., as this is the first time in history that they have been resettled to a third country in mass numbers. In addition to a deficient education, socio-cultural differences make the transition especially difficult considering the atypical family structures of the Kunama. Keeping families together remains critical in refugee resettlement, but this is made more difficult when single Kunama women often have children with multiple partners and there are a number of unofficial marriages within the people group. It is also common in the camps to have single adults who have left their families behind in Eritrea, as is the case with Marco and Mikele, making it incredibly difficult for those who leave to maintain family ties once they are resettled.

The first group of 29 Kunama flew out of Addis Ababa in July 2007 after a typical 3-5 day pre-departure cultural orientation session conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Over the course of a few months, up until September, some 700 Kunama would depart northern Ethiopia for various U.S. cities including Atlanta, Orlando, Seattle, Las Vegas, and Boston. UNHCR had determined “that the 700 Kunamas cannot return home in safety and dignity and resettlement is the most suitable solution.” Tokko Masso Anduku, leaving for Atlanta with her husband and three children, was optimistic about the move having heard from previously resettled friends that they appreciated life in America and the expanded educational and working opportunities. She was also worried, however, because of the cultural differences: “We are just illiterate farmers from rural Eritrea and adapting to a modern lifestyle in a

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130 Ibid, 4.
community whose language we do not understand worries me a lot. Moving to a new country brings with it multiple anxieties and uncertainties about the future, but after living in Shimelba for over six years hope for a more fruitful lifestyle and the promise of safety can begin to outweigh the fears.

Upon arrival in the U.S., NGOs such as the IRC, Catholic Charities, and Lutheran World Relief often work to facilitate their client’s successful cultural transition and to help them move towards self-sufficiency. Services include language classes, case management, employment, and financial/material assistance, all of which will be discussed further. Especially for the Kunama, immediate referral for English training classes is vital, both for general cultural adjustment and for obtaining the necessary skills to acquire a job and/or to go to school. The more that resettled refugees can begin to rely on themselves rather than on other people and organizations to provide for their needs the better, as independence revives a sense of self-respect that is often so hard to maintain while living in a refugee camp or through dealing with past experiences of trauma.

Language Barriers

Marco had the unusual opportunity to be able to attend high school in Eritrea before he left, and received a general education in science, math, and languages in the city of Duta until 2003. He is fluent in Kunama and Tigrinya, with intermediate level English skills. Also fluent in Kunama and Tigrinya with a basic proficiency in English, Mikele went to three years of primary school in Gonye, Eritrea for science, math, and English before fleeing at the height of the border war in 2000 like so many others. Not all the Kunama have received such an education, however. Three of the other Kunama who resettled at the same time came to the U.S. with no English skills aside from what

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they had picked up during cultural orientation in the refugee camps, having spent their lives herding cows rather than attending school. “Him: school. Me: Cows,” one such Kunama man said, explaining his lack of English skills to me at the IRC. Although I can tell that Marco and Mikele’s English has significantly improved since they first came to the U.S., Marco suggested that he was only a “little better,” while Mikele insists that his English is not better at all. Communication can be a source of embarrassment when talking to native English speakers, so it is important to encourage English language learners to enable them to see how much they have improved. If not, refugees may be in danger of isolating themselves further from the new culture because they do not want to attempt to communicate with Americans.

For millions of people currently living in the United States, English is not their native language. The 2000 census reported 20 million inhabitants with “poor English” skills and another 10 million inhabitants as having no ability to speak English, a significant increase from the preceding decade. Not being able to understand and be understood complicates all aspects of life, from communicating with doctors in receiving medical care, educational performance, obtaining a job, navigating transportation systems, and connecting with people in the local population. Although many social service agencies, and refugee resettlement organizations in particular, try to hire a multilingual staff to be able to function as translators with clients, the vast number of different languages people come into the country speaking makes it impossible to account for each one. Kunama is one such language that is particularly rare because it is spoken by such a small number of people: less than 100,000 in the world. Even as migrants to the U.S.

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continue to improve in English speaking and comprehension skills, it is remarkable how within daily conversations “the references to a shared heritage of literature, music, film, and television are endless”\textsuperscript{133}. Learning a language in the context of another country cannot begin to account for the cultural references and idiomatic expressions that are embedded in language. Even for proficient or fluent English speakers coming to the U.S. it can take months or years to become a well-versed conversationalist.

Medical care is an area that is particularly difficult without a translator, especially in the realm of mental health when diagnoses are dependent on conversations with the patient. It is vital to have access to skilled interpreters who are fluent in both languages in order to navigate the U.S. health care system and to reach an accurate diagnosis. With only three official Kunama interpreters currently in the U.S., it is common for small refugee groups to have no accessible translation services. When no trained medical interpreter is available, patients often have to rely on family members who are more proficient in English and can act as unofficial interpreters. In fact, “the vast majority of interpreters used in mental health have no formal training”\textsuperscript{134}. Using family members can create an additional host of problems, however, as a 1988 study in Britain of Gujarati-speaking patients from India showed that 70\% was the best accuracy that could be expected when meaning is lost in translation. Additional difficulties include inadequate language skills (even if they are more proficient, English is not likely the interpreter’s first language), hierarchical family dynamics, the stress of being emotionally attached to the patient in need while being forced to take on an extremely important role, cultural or

\textsuperscript{133} O’Neill, S. M. (2005), 181.
religious beliefs, and the embarrassment that can accompany having to speak bluntly in front of a loved one. Until the Kunama have a reliable network of migrants in the U.S. who are widely available and have been trained in medical terminology and cultural differences, finding effective health care will remain a major source of stress upon their group during the resettlement process.

**Case Management**

The resettlement process begins with case management services that assist refugees in all aspects of transitioning into life in the U.S. Marco and Mikele’s Case Manager at the IRC, also named Marco, is originally a refugee himself from the Sudan. Case managers find and furnish apartments prior to the refugee’s arrival, setting up phones, heat, and internet if available, arrange transport from the airport to the apartment, conduct orientation at the apartment, and assist with filling out forms for welfare services, food stamps, and medical forms. As the initial contact, case managers also refer refugees for other services within the resettlement office such as employment. Often new arrivals will also need medical assistance, and case managers act as liaisons between doctors and patients, accompanying them to appointments along with translation services if necessary. Marco and Mikele’s case manager was essential in finding them an apartment in Chelsea, a city highly concentrated with immigrants and refugees, where they now live with one other refugee who is also Kunama.

Particularly with people groups who have very little exposure to modern technology and urban living, familiarizing refugees such as the Kunama with material amenities can be a chore in itself. Coming from some of the most remote areas of Eritrea, many Kunama have previously only traveled by foot, camel, or donkey cart. Life

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in the camps exposes refugees to the vehicles of humanitarian aid workers, and may make them aware of technology such as electricity and television, but in general the Kunama have had very little direct experience with either. Running water, electric stoves, ovens, and refrigerators are all likely to be unfamiliar to a Kunama refugee\textsuperscript{136}. Case management thus starts with the basics, and is a constant process of educating new arrivals about all aspects of life.

Tasks that are simple to the average American such as paying bills, grocery shopping, and using public transportation are often extremely unfamiliar to new refugees and have to be learned with patience and perseverance. Case managers require a significant amount of support in service to refugees, and volunteers are essential in the office to alleviate their amount of work. Family mentors, for example, are volunteers who act as cultural educators and spend extra time building a relationship with the refugees in their homes, helping them through daily tasks, providing extra English language instruction, and answering any questions they may have about the U.S.

Providing these friendships is essential both for reducing the burden of assistance placed upon case managers and refugee resettlement offices in general as well as for giving refugees more people to connect with who come from the culture to which they are attempting to assimilate. Without cultural connections that provide opportunities to practice English, refugees who live in community with one another are in danger of never fully transitioning into a new culture.

**Employment**

Refugee resilience is also evident in the low-paying, entry-level jobs they are forced to take in order to obtain an income and achieve the self-sufficiency that is

\textsuperscript{136} Ranard, Donald A. (2007), 4.
necessary to be taken off welfare. The most common jobs that are sought for refugees with little to no English skills are dishwashing in restaurants, strenuous warehouse work, and other simple labor or manufacturing jobs that are usually paid at minimum wage. Even those who come to the United States with high levels of training in their home countries and English fluency need to lower their job expectations in order to gain employment experience. For example, migrants trained as dentist general practitioners can only be dental assistants in America because of different school and licensure requirements. A managerial-level electrical engineer from Iraq now works in data entry. A well-trained Military General with multiple post-graduate degrees from the Gambia now works as a security guard. Adapting to a new culture often means giving up hopes and dreams that people may have originally had for their lives in order to survive. The unstable political conditions and civil conflicts that create refugees can be sudden, causing people to flee their country unexpectedly and often live in refugee camps across a border before being granted asylum in another country. Survival thus takes precedence over other needs and desires.

Employment services become crucial immediately to help a family obtain opportunities for work. For the IRC, “the goal of employment is to both prepare clients to enter the American workforce through counseling, resume building, application practice, interview preparation, and job searching as well as place clients in jobs as early as possible so that they can achieve economic self-sufficiency”\textsuperscript{137}. Not only do jobs provide for the economic betterment of a refugee family, but it “adds greatly to the integrity of families who seek to establish themselves in a new country and provide for

their own needs.” Job training is thus both an economic necessity as well as a supportive force for human dignity and independence.

In terms of marketable economic skills, Marco volunteered in Barentu hospital while he was in high school and later was able to work as a tailor while living in Shimelba. His English is quickly improving, and at 24 years old he now works at the airport as a baggage handler full-time. The hardest adjustment to make for Marco was the language difference, but coming from high school Marco arrived with far superior language skills than many of his Kunama counterparts. “America is good,” he stated, because “in my country life is not a life.” Although Marco’s shifts at the airport often begin at 4:00 AM, his outlook remains incredibly positive and he seems to appreciate the chance to be economically self-sufficient. Rarely seen around the IRC office anymore, a job has helped to provide Marco with needed independence as he establishes a life for himself in this new country.

Job prospects are similar for the other four Kunama men who arrived at the same time as Marco. A shepherd and a shopkeeper in Shimelba is now a dishwasher at a small Japanese restaurant. Another shepherd from Koluku is a dishwasher at Bertucci’s Italian restaurant. A farmer back home in Koluku, Eritrea and a volunteer high school teacher and shopkeeper in Shimelba is now a boxing and packing attendant at a company that makes soup. Another farmer in Koluku with less English skills began at the same company, but was unable to handle the fast-paced environment and is now a sanitation worker and a stocking attendant at Abercrombie & Fitch. Initial job experiences can be difficult and frustrating, especially without the necessary language ability to adequately communicate with employers and co-workers. Hiring a refugee comes with a lot of

138 Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), (6 June 2002).
benefits because they are typically hard-working and can bring cultural understanding and diversity to a workforce, but sometimes they may also require additional accommodations, time, and patience to explain their responsibilities.

Mikele was able to earn some extra money in the camps as a talented necklace designer and a tailor in Shimelba, two skills that he brought with him to the U.S. Life is incredibly different between Eritrea and the U.S. for Mikele, especially in the realm of economic activities. Known for communal living, the Kunama were used to life as farmers, without the worry of paying rent for a house. Mikele noted that you can retain a sustainable lifestyle by farming your own food and sharing life with your neighbors, seeking an outside job only if you need extra money. “That’s a good life,” Mikele recalls. It was the “wrong” fight with Ethiopia that disrupted this good life for him, bringing violence and anxiety into the mainstream for Eritreans.

The hardest adjustment for him to make to the U.S. was reaching an understanding of why he needed to work in the first place, considering his farming background as a child. At first he did not want to work, because it was something he was not accustomed to, but once he arrived he began to comprehend just how necessary money was with rent to pay, food to buy, and other critical expenses such as health care. Mikele also found employment as a baggage handler at the airport, also often having to get up early for a shift that begins at 4:00 AM and sometimes lasts until the evening. He is optimistic, however, saying “I can see that life is good now because everyone is working.” Money, along with continuing to learn things like English and driving, motivate him to work for an improved future. At only 22 years old, Mikele may still have time to go back to school and continue to improve his job prospects. For the
moment, however, it is difficult for either Marco or Mikele to think about the future. Having gotten used to a life of being worried about survival and making it through one day at a time, they cannot even begin to think about what they will be doing in five or ten years, although it is a common interview question used in American culture.

The perseverance necessary to endure physically demanding jobs along with learning a new language and trying to understand a new culture make the lives of both immigrants and refugees uniquely difficult. Despite all the disadvantages associated with immigrant or refugee status, particularly financial strain, these groups of people show an incredible ability to persevere. By drawing on support from both the host culture and their ethnic culture, they are able to acculturate while still maintaining a healthy identity. Children and adolescents in particular seem to show more ease in adaptation than their parents, which can result in higher school performance and less behavioral problems than nonimmigrant children\(^\text{139}\). Inevitably immigrant and refugee populations will all face a variety of challenges and individuals differ greatly in their abilities to acculturate, but resilience seems to be the most prevalent factor uniting all of these people together and leading to their success in a new society. Having the chance to start a new life in an unfamiliar culture, although difficult, always retains the capacity for hope.

**Mental Health**

In the area of refugee mental health, problems can arise on both sides of the continental divide, prior to leaving the home country and upon arrival in the host country. Unfortunately, trauma experienced in home country conflict situations are never

forgotten, and often continue to be manifested in the refugee’s experience of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on top of cultural adjustment difficulties and for many the pressures of learning a new language. Refugees share many transitional difficulties with immigrants in terms of adjusting to a new culture, region, and learning a new language, but sometimes have to deal with added trauma associated with the situations under which they were forced to flee from home and the likely persecution that caused them to seek asylum in another country. Supporting the mental health of refugees alongside helping them transition into housing, jobs, and economic self-sufficiency is thus a vital aspect of social service in the field of refugee resettlement.

Like anyone who is uprooted, grieving the loss of one culture coexists with adjusting to a new culture. Different people have varying responses to this cultural transition. Some may cling to the culture they have left behind, idealizing it and finding it difficult to accept the new culture as valuable. On the reverse side of the spectrum, refugees may idealize the host society and quickly discard the values of their past culture, assimilating rapidly without retaining a healthy balance of what has been lost. Culture shock can be experienced both as cultural bereavement of the former culture and threatening to an individual sense of identity. Even when refugees had experienced human rights abuses in their home country, when they “lose their war-torn country (which in some sense abused them) [they] may feel physically safe in the country of resettlement, but they, too, may fret at the loss of all that is familiar to them”\textsuperscript{140}. Negative feelings about the country of resettlement can limit the ability of refugees to

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meaningfully engage in life and to take advantage of available opportunities while they try to resolve their cultural experiences into a new and firmly-rooted identity.

Although many studies point to the resilience of migrants and their superior mental health, it is still important to recognize the existence of mental health problems in immigrant and refugee populations and the specific needs they require from social service providers. A qualitative study from 2006 took a sample of 13 African immigrant families in the United States in order to better understand the psychological concerns they had for their well-being. Five self-identified African women identified depression as a major health concern for them, largely due to cultural obstacles such as “displacement, housing difficulties, language and communication barriers, and problems negotiating medical and educational systems.” Cultural adjustment can also be particularly challenging for African women because they face the “dual racism” of being both black and an immigrant. The effect of gender also plays a significant role as female immigrants may face shifting gender roles within a new culture and “may need to negotiate or renegotiate family expectations and responsibilities which may have consequences for their health and well-being.” Thus, African immigrant women face a host of risk factors for mental health problems as they transition into American life.

Due to the Western conceptualization of depression, study participants were able to explain mental health concerns as mostly psychosomatic in nature, emphasizing physical symptoms over mood complaints. The emergence of depressive symptoms was linked by the women to seven factors: change and expectations, parenting responsibilities, gender role strain, difficulties with systems, financial concerns, racism, and social isolation. In addition to all these environmental stressors, it is difficult for
immigrant women to find help because of the stigma placed on mental health concerns, especially in their culture. A distrust of American medicine leads women to find other sources of therapy such as social support. The previous coping mechanism used to deal with depressive symptoms was silence, but the study encouraged women participating to engage in mutually beneficial dialogue in the form of group therapy to discuss their similar concerns. Group counseling was a much more acceptable form of help to the participating women, shedding light on how to provide more effective physical and psychological health care to this population as a unique group with specific needs. Although many immigrants are able to adjust easily and may even show advantages when compared to their nonimmigrant counterparts, immigrants still face unique psychological concerns associated with acculturation and environmental stressors.

Although refugees do not choose to migrate to a new country like immigrants do, they otherwise face many of the same problems in terms of acculturation and adjustment. Refugees face a unique blend of both pre- and post-migration stress factors. Pre-migration stressors include “torture, forced labor, starvation, observed violence, and murder/loss of family members,” and post-migration stressors can include “limited English-speaking skills, unemployment, and poverty” that are “associated with major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).” In fact, “refugees resettled in Western countries are 10 times more likely to have PTSD compared to age-matched general populations.” This combination of stressors makes refugees a population that is


at high-risk for depression in a new country. Not only are they often undergoing a loss of their culture in trying to assimilate to become functional citizens in the host country, but their losses are often compounded by a loss of family, loved ones, and material possessions before, during, and after the move.

Despite these difficulties, there is always resilience evident in the lives of refugees receiving help at the IRC in Boston. The refugees I have had the opportunity to work with are generally receptive to our help, willing to begin employment as soon as possible, and eager to learn more English. The ability to smile, laugh, and make jokes is a universal coping mechanism that I have found integral in social service to refugees. Although I am on the side of helping them to acculturate to the United States, it is clear that they also require the social support of others from the same ethnicity. Immigrant and refugee groups form communities and engage in activities with one another in order to maintain vital aspects of their ethnic identity. The Kunama people, for example, have access to an Eritrean Community Center in Boston that hosts events for all the Eritreans in the surrounding area. By creating organizations, living with one another, and helping one another with communication through language translation, refugees are able to maintain pieces of their home country and create a healthy ethnic identity while adapting to a new culture.

**Interventions and Coping Mechanisms**

The plethora of adjustment issues when resettling to a new country can be frustrating, overwhelming, and time-consuming. Throughout the period of cultural adjustment, however, there are many effective coping mechanisms that alleviate the stress of being uprooted and being forced to adapt to something that is unfamiliar.
Certain protective factors that give refugees a support base for confronting cultural and identity conflicts are: a positive personality disposition, a supportive family environment, and external societal agencies that act as a resource and reinforce coping efforts. Although primarily applied to children, these protective factors are applicable to the Kunama adults who have journeyed to the U.S. as well. It is important to note the pervasive impact a refugee’s personality can have on his or her ability to adapt easily, because psychosocial support must vary from person to person to best cater to specific needs. Marco, for example, is a bit older than Mikele, spent less time in camps, has a higher level of education, and has a calm, easygoing, flexible, and hard-working disposition. All these character traits have aided him in establishing himself as a resident of the U.S. and are perhaps attributable for the more favorable outlook he has on his life now as compared to Mikele’s general sense of hope that is tinted with reservations.

Although few of the Kunama refugees that have been resettled in Boston have the benefit of familial support as a helpful protective factor, social support within their ethnic group remains a useful aspect of their daily lives. While living with each other discourages them from practicing English by allowing them to use their native tongue, it also provides a network of people who have relatable experiences and an unprecedented understanding of the cultural background and circumstances from which each refugee fled. Marco and Mikele have been fortunate enough to find a job at the same place, often with overlapping shifts, so they are able to help each other by navigating the public transportation system together on their way to work and being able to explain lingual or cultural disparities that spark confusion. The Eritrean Community Center of Boston, founded in 1983, acts as one such meeting grounds for promoting social cohesion among

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the group and benefiting from the knowledge of others. The center’s mission statement states that it “works to promote social and cultural interactions among Eritrean-Americans as well as area residents and friends for mutual understanding and awareness, integration, economic self-sufficiency, Eritrean heritage, and youth leadership”¹⁴⁴. Even among refugees from other countries it can be useful to share experiences, which was the impetus behind the IRC starting a “Newcomer’s Group” this year that meets in a social setting and encompasses a wide range of cultures.

When resettled refugees are struggling disproportionately in comparison to their peers, it can be incredibly valuable to provide therapeutic structures to help them deal with their emotions considering the high level of mental health risk within their population. Particularly for refugees suffering from clinical PTSD, depression, or anxiety, as conditions defined by Western culture, there are a number of barriers that prevent access to mental health service. Disallowing cultural healing practices that refugees may traditionally adhere to in favor of Western medicine exclusively may be counterproductive to the overall health of refugees as they attempt to merge two cultures into a new identity. Mental health conditions are often highly stigmatized in refugee populations, because of cultural or religious beliefs that suggest mental health is familial and can reduce the marriage prospects of other family members, illness as attributable to past family transgressions and therefore damaging to one’s reputation, and the fear that seeking help for mental illness will result in deportation or a loss of governmental benefits¹⁴⁵. Any psychological interventions thus must include an understanding of cultural practices and attempt to reach a convergence of the two approaches both out of

respect for the cultural practices of the refugee and in order to maintain trust between the
refugee and the Western physician.

Psychological support, like any other social service delivery to refugees, begins
with understanding: “In any cross-cultural work, psychologists have to fight against the
tendency toward professional distancing by leaving their offices and clinics and spending
time with refugees in their environment”146. Informal contact with refugees such as
joining with them in ethnic celebrations or festivities can be just as valuable as attending
training workshops and enhances cultural understanding147. Although research has not
been conducted specifically with the Kunama in the area of mental health, being
cognizant of common issues that affect refugees in the United States and other African
refugee groups as well as the unique cultural background the Kunama are bringing with
them serves as a backdrop for making logical connections and improving psychosocial
services. Although remedial work is important in providing counseling and healing from
past traumatic experiences, prevention is also a vital part of service to refugees in
recognizing them as an at-risk group for mental health difficulties and ensuring
placement of the protective factors that can avert future difficulties.

**Policy Implications**

Aside from recognizing the need for immediate English language instruction for
African refugees who come from non-English speaking backgrounds, perhaps the second
most difficult area of cultural adjustment is in employment support. As discussed
previously, jobs that are recognized as a necessity for everyone in American society is
not always an assumption that refugees have. The Kunama provide an example of a

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147 Ibid, 640.
people group coming from a more communal economic structure to which capitalistic society stands in direct contrast. Case management services provide a basis for explaining all the expenses accrued in conjunction with the cost of living in the U.S., and employment services cannot assume that everyone will automatically make the connection between the high cost of living and the amount of work that will be necessary to sustain a reasonable lifestyle.

Just as Mikele did not want to work when he first was resettled, an understanding of urban life in America has shown him how farming and shepherding are no longer options if he wants to be successful. Although it is important for refugees to begin work as soon as possible, adjusting to an entirely new economic system can take an extraordinary amount of time and effort. Seemingly insignificant values such as being punctual need to be taught along with interview and job skills so that employment services can act as a source of cultural education to provide refugees with the knowledge to adapt when their first job begins. Employment services should coincide with cultural training that can dispel any myths that might have been acquired about the U.S. before resettlement. There is an enormous gap between initially placing refugees in jobs and continuing to equip them with skills to further their job prospects in the future, something the IRC does by offering funding for training programs and educational opportunities.

Having a family mentor and other volunteer interactions is also perhaps an undervalued source of cultural adjustment for refugees. Organized opportunities to build relationships with Americans are vital to enabling refugees to form relationships outside the auspices of the IRC in the future, including relationships with employers and co-workers. Simply by offering friendship, American volunteers can sometimes provide
valuable English language practice and a cultural understanding of the U.S. that cannot always be found in the staff of a refugee resettlement office that often employs former refugees from diverse backgrounds. Having both relationships, those who can directly relate to the experience that they refugees are going through, and those who can provide a friendly representation of the American culture, are necessary to facilitate adjustment.

It is easy for Marco and Mikele to recognize how the IRC has been helpful to them over the past six months, citing that the agency found them an apartment, gave them opportunities to practice English, provided financial assistance, helped them apply to jobs, and offered general help whenever a problem arose. As clients they feel comfortable coming into the office if they have a question or need to be aided through a tricky situation such as an unexpected bill in the mail. When I asked them if there are any areas in which the IRC’s services could be improved or do for them something that they are not already doing they were unable to answer, although they agreed that as many opportunities for English language instruction and practice as possible is important.

When the Kunama refugees were struggling with their external ESL class or needed to learn additional information that the class was not teaching them, language services fell to the volunteers in employment services because a formal class or teaching structure for dealing with such problems is currently beyond the scope of the IRC’s services. The International Institute of Boston, another refugee resettlement agency, does however offer more formal English classes and computer skills training that clients can be referred to. When resources are insufficient to provide for a client’s needs, the network of social service agencies within the city often comes into play, offering further support to refugees.
Providing social service assistance to refugees is more of a partnership than a helping relationship. Especially when people are coming from warehousing situations in which they were denied fundamental rights to self-determination and had little options for participation and choice, equipping newly resettled refugees with the tools to become self-sufficient in all areas, not just economically, is beneficial for both sides. Being able to choose and not having to constantly rely on others for one’s livelihood is a fundamental aspect of human dignity, and thus an integral component of refugee care and assimilation into society.

Lending assistance to another is a moral duty upheld by the principle of solidarity and the implicit unity of humankind. In discussing the care of refugees, Drew Christiansen declares that “under the principle of solidarity, Catholic social teaching holds that affluent nations have the obligation to make sacrifices to close the gap with poor lands.” The basic fact of one’s wealth in light of another’s poverty requires a compassionate response to the extent one is able to help, especially considering the interdependence of all nations in the realm of economics and the inequalities that result from exploitative relationships. Helping the other is not simply motivated by compassion, but also benefits the country that is helping: “by working to move the country to observe universal human rights by extending those rights to peoples-in-movement, they are enriching the moral quality of our nation.” Intervention for the sake of justice acts to support the integrity of the intervening nation and to preserve a


149 Ibid, 97.
reputation of moral authority. Solidarity enables both nations to benefit as globalization further entrenches international mutual dependence.

Refugees crossing into the U.S. thus come as an opportunity, not a liability; a chance to further international solidarity and gain from the mutual learning and interdependence that comes from cross-cultural interactions. Where rights to immigrate and seek refuge collide with national sovereignty, the universal common good emerges as an overarching guideline. In an age of universal human rights, the church calls the nations of the world to respond with compassion by offering the world “the defense of the dignity of the person and the building up of the unity of the human family”\textsuperscript{150}.

Restoring dignity to people who have been uprooted from their homes not only by providing a place of asylum but by joining them in all aspects of their life to ease the stressful transition into the unfamiliar is at the center of refugee care and involves each member of the human family.

\textsuperscript{150} Christiansen, Drew (1988), 83.
Discussion

The main goal of this study was to bridge the gap between understanding the background and concerns of the Kunama ethnic group and providing them with the most effective social services possible. By conducting interviews with two refugees who are a part of this group of new arrivals, the findings supported the literature that points to both the resilience and the challenges that are faced by refugees. Marco and Mikele are two examples of the unique challenges that are faced by the Kunama in the areas of language and employment, although they are farther along in English skills than many other Kunama. No broader implications can be inferred from such a small sample size, but case studies are a valuable basis for questions to direct further research.

There is currently no previous research on Kunama living in the U.S., especially since for the most part they are a group that recently arrived. Whether or not they are a group at particular risk for mental health challenges along with other African refugees remains to be substantiated. Limited English skills prevented more in depth questions from being asked, so further research should make use of translation services if available. It is also important to recognize cultural differences when writing interview questions, because often questions that are framed from a Western perspective, such as what sort of job someone would like to be doing in five years time, can be confusing to the Kunama and may also seem trivial. Explaining the rational behind each question will enable refugee participants to feel more informed about the study that is taking place and to allow for more accurate and representative responses.

This study does however raise a lot of questions about social services to refugees in general and whether it can differ significantly in its application to different cultural and
ethnic groups. Recognizing the familiarity a certain group has with modern technology, urban living, and other cultural differences informs the education and support they need to receive upon arrival, particularly in directing that education towards getting and maintaining a job. Again, explaining the rational behind employment and various modern amenities will allow the refugee to make more informed decisions when they are self-sufficient. Truly taking the time to explore cultural differences enables refugees to retain a sense of dignity as people who are worthy of our time and our help. Affirming the values of their own culture through mutual understanding while equipping them with the necessary skills to navigate a new culture provides a foundation for refugees to maintain their identity while still being able to become informed citizens in the U.S.
Conclusion

Understanding where people are coming from and the unique contexts from which they derive their identity is an integral part of delivering the most effective social services possible. Throughout this paper, I have attempted to provide such a backdrop for the Kunama people from Eritrea, as they are, like any cultural or ethnic group, strongly affected by their unique history and present circumstances. Events that have been long buried in history continue to make an impact on why the Kunama are a vulnerable group of people with a past of being marginalized, whether it was under Italian colonialism, British administration, the Ethiopian Federation, or their own government in an independent Eritrea. Although they are a small group of people, these instances have given them a unique place in history at a crossroads between two nations, Ethiopia and Eritrea, as direct witnesses to the painful struggle that can accompany secession and subsequent independence. There is always ambiguity in the midst of conflict, and the distinct place occupied by the Kunama throughout the border struggle serves as a reminder that neither side is completely devoid of fault.

Bringing this history with them, the Kunama have more recently embarked on a new phase of their journey: one of dispersion, protracted refugee crises, and resettlement in new and foreign countries. Adjusting to a new culture and leaving behind all that is familiar is difficult for any immigrant or refugee, and always takes time and perseverance. Taking the time to become familiar with the exceptional needs of each migrant and the wider group characteristics that have impacted his or her identity is a vital step in alleviating this transition and enabling social service providers to come alongside their clients in solidarity. We live in a global age of protracted refugee crises,
with millions of people seeking outside aid to provide them with services that go beyond the basic necessities of food and shelter to issues of educational and language development, psychosocial health, physical protection, and accompaniment through times of great trauma, loss, and cultural adjustment. All of these services and components must be present to facilitate the most effective cultural adjustment possible, and to give Kunama refugees the tools and resources to construct their own future, regardless of what country they find themselves in.
Bibliography


81


Appendix 1.
Map of Eritrea. Obtained from the University of Pennsylvania Department of African Studies, 16 April 2008: [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/CIA_Maps/Eritrea_19872.gif](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/CIA_Maps/Eritrea_19872.gif)

Appendix 2.
Map of Eritrea’s ethnic groups. Obtained 16 April 2008 from http://www.insideeritrea.com/eripeople/people01.htm

Appendix 3.


Appendix 4.
Interview Questions

1. When did you arrive in the United States?

2. What is the most different about life in the U.S. compared to back home?

3. Besides English, what was the hardest adjustment to make to the U.S.? What was the easiest?

4. How much English did you speak when you arrived? How much do you speak now?

5. What do you miss most about home?

6. What do you like best about the U.S.? What do you like least?

7. What has been helpful to you in adjusting to the U.S.?

8. Is there anything you wish the IRC could do for you that they are not already doing?

9. Are you currently employed? What do you do?

10. How old are you?

11. What do you think you will be doing in 10 years?

12. Where is your family? Who is in the U.S., and who is in Africa?

13. Do you think you will ever visit back home in the future?

14. What about the U.S. makes you feel most at home?
Interview: Informed Consent Form

I am conducting research for my Senior Thesis entitled “The Cultural Adjustment and Mental Health of African Refugees in the United States: The Case of the Kunama from Eritrea”.

This research involves personal interviews with recently resettled Kunama refugees to the United States, to further understand their most critical cultural adjustment difficulties and the major differences between their home culture and the culture of the United States.

As a Kunama refugee who has arrived in the United States within the past year, you are being asked to participate in one interview that will last approximately 20 minutes. The interview will ask you about your current activities in the United States, what aspects of life in the United States you have found most difficult to adjust to, and how quickly and easily you are adapting. There are no anticipated risks to participating in this interview; however, there may be unknown risks. If emotional discomfort continues after the completion of the interview, family mentors will be notified and advised on possible counseling and therapy.

By choosing to participate in this interview, you will provide social service providers specializing in refugee resettlement with information on how to better serve you and the Kunama people by understanding the areas in which you require the most help.

You understand that your name will be kept confidential in connection with your answers, but your initials may be used.

During the interview procedure, you may choose to decline to answer a question at any time. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and may be discontinued at any time. Withdrawal from participation will not result in denial of entitled benefits.

By signing your name below, you acknowledge that you have read and understand the above, been free to ask questions of the researcher, consent to participation in this study, and confirm that you have received a copy of this informed consent document.

Name (printed): ________________________________________________________

Signature: ___________________________ Date: _______________
Research Summary

Title: The Cultural Adjustment and Mental Health of African Refugees in the United States: The Case of the Kunama from Eritrea

A. Introduction and Background:

1. Adjustment to a new culture can be a difficult experience for immigrant populations, but is often especially problematic for refugees dealing with previous mental trauma experienced in their home country prior to resettlement. I hypothesize that as a group with little to no background in English, Kunama people have struggled both culturally and mentally to transition to a new life in the United States.

2. As a historically oppressed ethnic minority group in Eritrea, the Kunama people have recently been arriving to the United States for resettlement in higher numbers. My thesis will address three main topics: the history of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the situation of the Kunama people, the refugee resettlement process from Africa to the United States, and the cultural adjustment and mental health of Kunama refugees after entering the United States.

B. Specific Aims/Study Objectives:

1. By focusing on this group of people from Eritrea, I seek to raise an awareness of the particular difficulties that this population has in both cultural and mental adjustment during the resettlement process, so that better and more individualized social support can be created to aid them. I hope to learn about the specific cultural differences that exist between the United States and the Kunama, and what coping skills the Kunama people are using to adjust to these changes. I also aim to uncover the greatest concerns and the areas in which Kunama refugees require the most help in becoming successful and active citizens in their new country.

C. Materials, Methods and Analysis (quantitative and qualitative):

1. Data will be collected via an interview conducted in person with six different Kunama refugees in the Boston area. A translator will be necessary for three of these interviews, as half of the sample has far superior English skills than the other half.

2. A structured interview will be conducted that will contain the same questions for all six study participants.

3. Each interview will last about 20 minutes. The timeline for conducting the interviews will be the month of February 2008. The whole process will take approximately three hours, to finish the interview with all six participants.

4. I will use grounded theory to analyze my data, organizing it by themes to be interpreted for meaning. Because it is qualitative data using a small number of case studies, statistics are not necessary.

D. Research Population & Recruitment Methods:

1. Participants must be of Kunama descent, have refugee status in the United States, and must have arrived within the last year.

2. Age must be adult, to maintain consistency among the six cases and to be old enough to answer the interview questions, and the race of study participants must be Kunama. Gender is not important. The number will be kept at around six to have a manageable number of interviews.

3. I chose the source of participants from volunteer work at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) of Boston.
4. Participants are already known personally to the researcher and will be asked in person by the researcher if they are willing to participate in the interview.

5. No recruitment tools are necessary.

E. Informed Consent Procedure

1. The researcher will perform the informed consent procedure.
2. The researcher will be under faculty supervision, has completed the Human Participant Protections Education for Research Teams tutorial, and will be trained to collect qualitative data by the faculty supervisor.
3. Participants will receive an explanation of the interview procedure in both English and Kunama, when necessary. Participants will be encouraged to ask questions about the procedures, will be asked if they understand the procedure, and will sign a written document stating their consent to participate in the interview.

F. Confidentiality:

1. Data will be stored on the personal computer and in the desk of the researcher. No one else will have access to the area, and a password will be used to ensure that the researcher is the only person with access to the computer. The only other person who will be allowed access to the data is the Faculty Advisor.
2. Data will be stored in both hard copies and electronic copies.
3. In the research paper, the participant’s initials will be used, and initials only will be stored with the data.

G. Potential Research risks or discomforts to participants:

1. Psychological or emotional discomfort is possible when answering questions about a refugee’s home country or level of distress upon resettlement.
2. The likelihood of psychological or emotional discomfort is minimal because of the generality of the interview questions. The magnitude is expected to be slim.
3. The participants will be encouraged to decline to answer a question at anytime to reduce potential psychological or emotional discomfort, as well as being free to decline participation or terminate participation in the study at any time. If discomfort continues after completing the interview, family mentors who work with the participants will be notified and be given contact information to potential counseling options.

H. Potential Research Benefits to Participants:

1. Generalized research data will be shared with the staff of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) of Boston to improve their ability to work with Kunama refugees and to better understand their background. Participants will directly benefit from this research through an improved understanding by their direct social service providers. Participant volunteer mentors will also be advised as to what cultural adjustment issues need to most readily be addressed to focus the content of their mentor activities to better address the most urgent needs of the participants. If published, this study will also contribute to societal understanding and awareness of the specific needs of the Kunama people and the results of this study will become available to other social welfare providers to Kunama refugees and improve their practices.
2. All the participants will benefit to some extent, as all will be matched with family mentors who will be made aware of their cultural needs as expressed in the study.